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Engaging Aging

Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers: Pilgrimage into the Elder Years

By Brother Wayne J. Fitzpatrick, MM

“An Elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential, and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection to the future... An Elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and formulate this into a legacy for future generations.”

Live Oak Project

In 1911, with the support and blessing of the Bishops of the United States and Pope St. Pius X, Father James Anthony Walsh and Father Thomas Frederick Price moved forward with the dream to begin an American Missionary Society. A seminary was established atop Mary's Knoll (Maryknoll) in Ossining, NY, overlooking the Hudson River, to train men to go out as priests and brothers to serve the universal Church. It was time for this young Church in the United States, which until 1908 had been considered mission territory by Rome, to go out to others and preach the Gospel.

For 112 years Maryknoll missionaries, as part of a Missionary Society of Apostolic Life, have made our homes in communities in Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the United States. We've engaged with and learned from the people we serve. The spirituality of our missionary vocation is deeply rooted in the cultures in which we live. Among the many gifts we've received is a wisdom about aging that these cultures have to offer. Wisdom figures we encounter in our lived pastoral experiences are our teachers, mentors and guides on the pilgrimage into the elder years. They teach us what it means to be attuned to the cycles of the Earth and to respect aging as a natural process. Elder is better. Maturity comes with age.



Brother Wayne J. Fitzpatrick, MM, is a Maryknoll missionary currently serving as Assistant Regional Superior for the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers in the United States Region, and as Director of Pastoral and Spiritual Life and House Superior at the Maryknoll Society Center in New York. In addition to offering retreats and workshops, Brother Wayne is also a certified retirement planning specialist for religious and has worked extensively in elder care consulting. He holds a masters degree in theology, a masters degree in pastoral counseling, and a certificate in geriatric care management.

Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers: Pilgrimage into the Elder Years, continued

In this spirit, the Maryknoll Society continues to give a great deal of attention to the preparation of our brothers and priests for their pilgrimage into the elder years, paying special attention to how they can continue to live out their missionary vocation during this time. The changes and transitions of bridging borders and cultures that our men experienced in their mission areas still shape the reflection and preparation necessary for their elder years.

A Sense of Identity

The question I often hear from my elder brother missionaries who have returned to Maryknoll's Center in New York is, "Who am I now outside of my mission, parish or ministry?" All that gave meaning, purpose and life to the man who preached the Gospel as a missionary priest or brother feels as if it is still on the other side of the world where he spent 40 to 50 years of his life. The elder pilgrimage has brought a sense of disconnection from all he once knew. The man whose heart is in his mission home among the

people he served now finds himself physically back in the place of his birth and faith formation.

One of my Maryknoll brothers who served in East Africa for more than 50 years of his priesthood beautifully expressed the difficulties of change and transition for the elder missionary who has such deep pastoral and spiritual connection with the people and distant places he served. During a visit I simply shared with him that this transition must be so very difficult. He acknowledged my comment and closed his eyes. What happened next was truly a prayer. He shared:

I miss the people.

I miss my brother missionaries.

I miss the chaos of the culture.

I miss the laughter of the children.

I miss the parish. I miss Lake Victoria.

I miss the smells, the food, and the celebrations.

As he continued, I couldn't help thinking that his experience could be repeated with so many other missionaries.

The Challenge of Integration

The challenge we face is to help our brothers see that their missionary vocation has not ended, but continues as an elder here in their home culture. The spirituality of the elder years for our priests and brothers is a spirituality of storytelling. Our elder missionaries' stories contain the wisdom of experience from praying together, sharing Scripture and the sacramental life of the Church with the people they served. These stories are filled with the ordinariness, humor, simplicity, and courage of the tellers as they lived the option for the poor and respect for local culture.

Maryknoll Spirituality and the aging process are significantly informed by our mission experience, mission stories, family of origin and brother missionaries already on the elder pilgrimage.

Maryknoll Brother Marty Shea (below, right) from Massachusetts is having a pastoral visit on mission in Guatemala. (All photographs are used with permission of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, Inc. Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.)



Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers: Pilgrimage into the Elder Years, continued



Maryknoll Father John Lange came to the Society from Iowa. He served for over 50 years in Kenya, Tanzania, and East Africa. He was engaged in pastoral work and valued education as a priority for the people he served. He now resides at the Maryknoll Center in Ossining, New York.

Father Lange is pictured left, ministering as Lector at a Maryknoll Jubilee Mass in Our Lady Queen of Apostles Chapel, Ossining, New York.

How we live our missionary vocation is how we will grow older. Transition and change as missionaries signal an opportunity to deepen the integration of being a missionary brother or priest. The challenge and opportunity facing those on the elder pilgrimage is clear: What is my identity and ministry now as a Maryknoll Missionary?

The task of integration is an urgent one for our elder missionaries. It is important that all Maryknoll brothers and priests reflect deeply on this season of life with the hope of integrating who they are and what they do for the sake of mission. Their identity remains linked to their mission ministry and service for the purpose of the Gospel. On the elder pilgrimage, who they are in this time of their missionary priesthood and brotherhood takes precedence over what they do.

Proactive Planning

Over the last several decades, the Maryknoll Society has taken a proactive position in preparing our missionaries for the pilgrimage of the elder years. Maryknoll has and continues to dedicate resources to support the men's physical, mental and spiritual wellness. Several workshops and seminars have been offered in these areas as

well as specifically on the Spirituality of Aging. Many Maryknoll missionaries participated in the Retirement Success Profile for Religious Societies of Apostolic Life, looking at 15 key factors to be considered on the pilgrimage to the elder years. All of these opportunities have benefited the men in their discernment and planning for the later stages of life. We do not always find total success in journeying with our brothers on the pilgrimage, but we hope and pray that the experiences we do provide will benefit each missionary and assist him on his own pilgrimage.

At the most recent Maryknoll Society General Chapter in 2021, the care of our brothers was a significant theme with defined action steps guiding how the Society will move forward. Our mandate regarding healthcare of Maryknoll Society members states: "We will continue to develop Person-Centered Care for Society members impacted by physical and emotional health issues so that they continue their journey as the missionary disciples God created them to be."

Action Steps

Following on the mandate, we have determined several action steps that address the comprehensive nature of healthcare for our members.

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- Affirm the Maryknoll Society approved documents indicating guiding values, agreements and definitions in the wellness and care of Maryknoll Society members:
 - “Person-centered Philosophy: Aging and the Senior Years”
 - “Guidance and Support: Times of Transition”
- This mandate is actualized on the Regional level, U.S. and Overseas through using the guidelines in the document, “Guidance and Support: Times of Transition.”
- Make members more aware of what the Society has been doing in person-centered care and what services are available to them.
- Assist members to become more aware of levels of care and living options.
- Continue to explore and expand the use of government benefits that will support Society Health Care.
- Affirm that the care of members is a priority and is directed in conformity with the facilities, capabilities and resources at the Maryknoll Society’s disposal.
- Prepare various options for education and training in person-centered care for Society members, employees and health care and pastoral care staff.
- Schedule regular workshops on paschal spirituality, aging, wellness and members’ identity as missionaries.

In response to our healthcare mandate the Society instituted or enhanced ministries and practices for all members with a special focus on our elder Society members. Every effort is made to assure we practice Person-Centered Care which embraces the spiritual, pastoral and



Maryknoll Father John Kaserow, (above) is from Illinois. He is now in residence at the Assisted Living Community, Maryknoll, New York. Father Kaserow worked in Taiwan and served as professor in the Maryknoll Seminary, Maryknoll School of Theology and Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

health care of each priest and brother. The Maryknoll Society collaborates with the Avila Institute of Gerontology on Person-Centered Care Education and Training.

Person-Centered Care

As we learn the importance of addressing the whole person, we have tried to address the care of our members in many ways. For example, we attend to the importance of deepening one’s spiritual life, making spiritual direction essential to the pilgrimage into the elder years of our missionaries. Especially for the men who are unable to go out for spiritual direction, we reached out to five local spiritual directors (one diocesan priest, two Franciscan Friars and two religious sisters) in the Ossining, New York area. They all agreed to offer spiritual direction for the men here at Maryknoll.

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On a weekly basis we offer centering prayer, Scripture reflection and mission spirituality reflection. Several times a year we offer workshops on theology, spirituality, Scripture, prayer, healthy aging, and mission to name a few. Keeping the men interested and curious about these issues is important to generativity in the aging process.

Annual Retreat and Days of Reflection become anchor points for the pilgrimage and spiritual life review as brothers and priests age. Aware that the spirituality of the elder years is a spirituality of storytelling, we initiated a project of having our elders interviewed, enabling them to share their vocation and mission stories. This project is also supported by recent photography done with mission photos of each man from his various missions and ministries.

Impact of COVID

Person-Centered Care received its greatest challenge in our journey through the COVID pandemic of 2020-2021. At the time there were around 100 brothers and priests residing at the Maryknoll Center. Fifteen of our brothers and priests passed away from COVID and complications due to the virus. It was a difficult and painful time for the entire Maryknoll Society as we stumbled through the darkness of all that was unknown about this new disease.

The Pastoral and Spiritual Care personnel at Maryknoll dis-

cussed how we could accompany our brothers and ourselves during this difficult time. We could not be with our brothers as they were called home to God, nor could we gather for a funeral. We began to use the phone and other technological platforms to reach out to one another. Men were calling each other, sometimes praying the rosary over the phone. Using our closed circuit broadcast capabilities, we had daily Mass shown from our Queen of Apostles Chapel.

As we learned more about COVID from health care professionals and a vaccine became available, we were able to gather for small group reflection with as many as ten men at a time, socially distanced in a large room. We asked a simple question: "How are you doing in the midst of this pandemic?" Many reflected on the



The Quadrangle at Maryknoll Center, Ossining, New York. The Departure Bell was traditionally rung when new missionaries went out on mission after receiving their mission cross.

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loss of their brothers, classmates and friends in Maryknoll whom they could not be with when they passed. Others shared their deep concern for the people they served in mission, especially the poor who may not receive a vaccination for a long time. Some grieved the loss of family members and struggled with the impact of being quarantined and isolated from one another for long periods of time.

Invitation to Reflect

In March and April 2021, all Maryknoll Society members were invited to a reflective experience. It was a simple invitation to write, perhaps only a few sentences, a prayer, or some phrases, to express, honor, acknowledge, and claim how we found meaning in the loss and grief experienced through the pandemic. We were to consider how the treasure of our faith revealed more abundant life. Thirty-six brothers and priests from the U.S. and around the mission world responded with a story, prayer or poem. The theme connecting the reflections was “Coming through the Pandemic: We Commemorate, Honor and Learn.”

Maryknoll priests and brothers (below) celebrating Chinese New Year at the Maryknoll Society Center in New York.

Spirit of Oneness

As captured in the reflection of one of our brothers, I believe it is a oneness we seek on the pilgrimage to the elder years; oneness with the “One who comes to us and wipes away our tears”. It is oneness with each other through the lenses of our various Religious Communities and Societies of Apostolic Life charisms as we attend to body, mind and spirit that will aid us on this life pilgrimage. It is oneness with a wisdom of aging from the people and cultures we served and those who open our eyes to the cyclical rhythms of Earth and growing older.

Our Co-Founder, Bishop James Anthony Walsh, knew this in the earliest days of the Society when he wrote in the Society’s Constitutions: “We, the Maryknoll fathers and brothers, are called to follow Jesus Christ. We live out our vocation within the ever-changing realities of our lives and our society; and each stage calls us to live our missionary life in a new way. This, then, is our vocation. You are a Maryknoller, an apostle, a missionary, an intimate follower of Christ ... And you are given the inestimable privilege of being a bearer of this message.”



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Through the Tears...

Crying for Joy

By Brother Marty Shea, MM

*There are times when you
become free enough
to write a prayer, a poem,
a parable.*

*Unable to return to my mission
because of the
COVID pandemic,
what I most remember are the
tears,*

warm and cold tears.

They are like the Irish.

They cry a lot.

We get along just fine.

*We touch the tears
and something happens,
way down deep.*

Guess it's the heart.

*And we find ourselves together,
crying for the joy of it, because
through the tears
we become one
in the One who comes to us
and wipes away our tears
even as we cry ...*

Message from the National Religious Retirement Office



As we mark the season of Advent once again, the early arrival of darkened nights offers an invitation to pause, even briefly, for moments of quiet reflection. We might find ourselves drawn to remembering events of the past months as the year draws to an end, or to looking forward as a new liturgical year begins.

Here at the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO), we find ourselves looking in both directions this Advent. As Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM, has stepped away from her position as Executive Director, we are especially grateful for her seven years of generous service and leadership on behalf of religious communities throughout the United States. She never wavered in her commitment to the common good of all religious, so please join us in praying for her and wishing her all the best as she returns to her community in California.

At the same time, we look ahead with confidence and anticipation as Mr. John Knutsen transitions from his position as Education and Outreach Manager at NRRO into the responsibilities of Director. The legacy of NRRO is one of stewardship and belief in the value of the lives of generations of religious men and women who have served God's people. John is humbled for the opportunity to continue that legacy.

Finally, we ask you to join all of us in the National Religious Retirement Office as we continue to give thanks this Christmas for the generosity of our many friends and loyal benefactors. We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy in your life and to our world throughout the coming year.

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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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