



Retirement Fund for Religious

Spring 2011 Newsletter

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Lessons of a Centenarian



Sr. Genevieve Kunkel, SSND

Perform a Google search of Sister Genevieve Kunkel, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Atlantic-Midwest Province, and you'll get a whole page of hits. Among these are a recent article in the Archdiocese of Baltimore's *Catholic Review*, quotes on health and fitness blogs, and a 2004 audio recording of testimony she gave before Congress in support of funding for Alzheimer's research. She is a participant in the famous Nun Study, a longitudinal study on aging and Alzheimer's disease originated by Dr. David Snowdon and now based at the University of Minnesota. As such, she has appeared on NBC's *Today Show* and has been interviewed, photographed, and endlessly quoted.

It seems that Sister Genevieve, who recently celebrated her 100th birthday, has found the secret to happiness and long life. But for those who know her best, her "secret" is not such a mystery. "She just has an exceptional outlook on life," notes Sister Bernice Feilinger, SSND, local leader for Maria Health Care Center, a skilled-care facility in Baltimore, Maryland, that is owned and operated by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Atlantic-Midwest Province. "She is—quite simply—joyous, grateful, and faith-filled."

In 1932, shortly after graduating from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Sister Genevieve began her postulancy. The eldest of nine children, Sister Genevieve credits her relationship with her family as the foundation for her character and her vocation. "I was shaped by my home, my parents, and my siblings," she says.

Sister Genevieve grew up in Baltimore and leaving home was one of the most difficult aspects of her early years as a sister. "I was sent to Boston to teach at one of our schools," she recalls. "I was quite homesick those first few months. I just missed my family terribly." True to form, however, Sister Genevieve made the best of a difficult situation, embracing the opportunity to share her love of the English language with her students.

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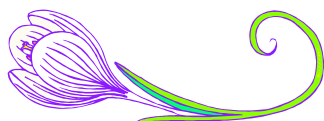
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For some thirty years, Sister Genevieve taught at SSND high schools, along the way acquiring a master's degree in English. Later, she served as the director of sister education at her alma mater and then as an educational consultant. In 1991, she moved to Villa Assumpta, one of three retirement facilities housing sisters of the Atlantic-Midwest Province and the location of Maria Health Care Center.

During her time at Villa Assumpta, Sister Genevieve has ministered in various capacities, including volunteering at the community's gift shop, serving as a lector and a Eucharistic minister for Mass, and visiting sisters in Maria Health Care Center, where she now also resides. Today, Sister Genevieve is deeply committed to a ministry of prayer, remembering daily the intentions of others. She remains an avid reader and enjoys staying on top of current events by keeping up with the *New York Times* and watching CNN.

Sister Genevieve continues to participate in annual cognitive and physiological testing related to the Nun Study. "I feel whatever I can contribute to the future, I should. Otherwise, I'd never have been an educator," explains Sister Genevieve. She is featured in Dr. Snowdon's 2001 book, *Aging With Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us About Leading Longer, Healthier, and More Meaningful Lives*. Not surprisingly, Sister Genevieve's chapter focuses on the relationship between positive emotions and longevity.

Spending time with Sister Genevieve, it is easy to see that her ministry of presence is a singular gift. The happiness and peace she radiates are clearly the manifestation of God's love working in and through her. At 100, this teacher still has plenty of lessons to share, perhaps the greatest of which is her approach to life. She says, "My favorite virtue is hope. If you hope, you cope. If you don't, you mope."



WANTED:

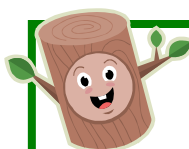
The Oldest Woman and Man Religious

According to data submitted to the NRRO by participating religious communities, there are 254 women and men religious between the ages of 99 and 104. This includes seventeen religious who are 104 or older, but who is the oldest? Do you think he or she lives in your community? If so, please contact us at retirement@uscgb.org or call 202-541-3215 to let us know. We'll include a short profile of the oldest female religious and the oldest male religious in our next newsletter.



If you would like to make a bequest or restricted gift to the National Religious Retirement Office, the following information should be used:

To the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Incorporated for the exclusive purpose of assisting Roman Catholic religious orders in the United States to provide for the retirement needs of their elderly members.



Help NRRO Go Green

If you are not already receiving this newsletter electronically and would like to do so, please contact us at retirement@uscgb.org to have your e-mail address added to our distribution list.
Thank you

Message from the Executive Director

Open almost any religious community's newsletter and included will be details of members who have recently observed jubilees. Anniversaries of profession into religious life are a time for reflection and celebration. Witnessing these events is inspiring.

At the end of my first year of religious life, one of our sisters, Sister Imelda, celebrated her seventieth jubilee. At that time, seventieth jubilees were all but unheard of, which is probably why I recall this one so clearly. A Mass was celebrated to mark the occasion, during which Sister Imelda renewed her vows. After reciting our community's traditional vow formula, she prayed, "I ask for the gift of perseverance."

What?!

Perseverance? If seventy years didn't demonstrate perseverance, I couldn't imagine what would. And if she was still looking for help to persevere in her vocation as a religious, what possible hope could I have?

Now that I am older, I realize that her struggle was not about remaining a sister. Though I, at the age of twenty, was still wrestling with the magnitude of a lifelong commitment, Sister Imelda was not. She had pledged her fidelity long ago. No, her struggle was to remain steadfast in her relationship with God and to avoid becoming complacent. Even after seventy years, she wanted to continue to fall ever more deeply in love with the God to whom she had given her life.

We are all called to grow in this love relationship with God. Senior religious like Sister Imelda—or Sister Genevieve from our feature story—witness to us that this call does not end with advanced age. Rather, the elder years offer new avenues for knowing God and sharing his love with others.

Though over ninety and living in our infirmary, Sister Imelda was still very much engaged in the journey; and she was praying for strength to continue on the road. People often say it's the journey—not the destination—that matters. This may

be true, except when your goal is heaven. In that case, the destination matters very much! And so, as did Sister Imelda, I pray for myself and for all of you:

"Lord, please give us the perseverance to stay on the path that leads to you."

May our loving God bless you,

Sister Janice Bader, CPPS
Executive Director



Please send changes in address, phone, E-mail or congregational leadership to NRRO c/o Jean Smith (jsmith@uscgb.org), so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.

Thank You!

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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.

The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.



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CALENDAR



Direct Care Assistance Applications Due

RFR Collection Proceeds Due

Planning and Implementation Workshop, Menlo Park, CA

Retirement Needs Analysis mailed

Direct Care Assistance checks distributed

March 31, 2011

March 31, 2011

April 5-7, 2011

Mid May, 2011

June, 2011

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
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