



Engaging Aging

To Walk with Ever Growing Strength: Forming One Another

By Sister Marian Sartain, OP

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NRRO 7

“The presence within community of the sisters in these later years of profession is a much needed gift in the life of the congregation....”

Ratio Institutionis

Back in “her day,” Sister Mary Jeanne might have seemed to some a rather stern and exacting presence. Students never had to wonder what she expected, and mischievous behavior was quickly curbed under her watchful eye (which they thought was unsmiling and unyielding). Capable, independent and serious about her responsibilities, Sister Mary Jeanne lived and served in community for over eighty years, dying just short of her 103rd birthday.

Truth to tell, however, any impression of a stern, unyielding figure is far from being the true likeness of Sister Mary Jeanne now remembered in community. I myself most readily recall my favorite image of her, sitting in her wheelchair at table in our Motherhouse refectory during the last few years of her life. Now tiny, bent, and all-but-blind from macular degeneration, she would be seated next to whatever young sister was feeding her on a given night. Still self-possessed and capable, Sister Mary Jeanne was the picture of gracious dignity, not in the least embarrassed at the circumstances. Nonetheless, she was wholly dependent for her next bite on the young sister beside her. At the same time, the young one obviously depended on Sister Mary Jeanne to put her at ease in a potentially awkward situation. Sister Mary Jeanne was not beyond a mischievous whispered comment now and then, which only the two of them could hear; and both were known

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To Walk with Ever Growing Strength, continued



Sister Mary Jeanne (above, right) greets novice Sister Maria Francesca the day she receives the habit. (All pictures taken by Sister Mary Justin, OP)

to smile discreetly at one another as the meal continued. Clearly, they understood each other.

As time went on, I began to reflect that a delightful exchange was taking place between the two sisters at table: the elder offering the younger her openness to the care she was receiving; the younger, enriched by the gift of her elder's receptivity to her sometimes inefficient efforts to give. Food was merely the excuse for what was really going on. The lovely truth of the matter dawned on me one evening: they were actually feeding one another. It was a mutual exchange of love, the kind given and received in community. And it was formative for them both.

Lifelong Pursuit

This memory has become for me a sort of icon of the mutually nurturing fruits of the daily and ordinary interactions between our younger and older sisters, so commonplace in the setting of our Motherhouse and novitiate. I am sure this is mirrored in the experience of countless other religious communities, as we give ourselves to the privilege of caring for our aging sisters and come to realize more deeply the mysterious ways in which they extend their gift of care to

us. Both younger and elder are changed somehow, and grow through this exchange, which becomes an occasion of grace for both, a grace that is integral to religious formation in community.

In being invited to contribute to *Engaging Aging* an article describing ways in which our community is addressing aging in religious life, especially with our younger members, it struck me that perhaps an added depth of focus could be attained by considering the topic through the lens of religious formation. For consecrated persons, old age is the culmination of what Pope John Paul II called in *Vita Consecrata* "the mysterious process of formation which began many years before."

Our community's *Ratio Institutionis*, a document setting out in stages the fundamental principles for our initial and ongoing formation program, unfolds from the essential conviction that religious formation does not end with the novitiate or final profession, or, for that matter, with one's golden or diamond jubilee. It is, rather, a lifelong pursuit.

Because our community of 300 encompasses a broad range of ages, we are able very naturally to enjoy interactions among varying age groups. Some of these are planned, but most are simply the way community life plays out day to day. The Motherhouse in Nashville remains "home" for the entire community, and finds all of us returning there regularly to be together for extended times. This "being together" in the atmosphere of the Motherhouse reminds us who we are, and enables us to know one another, regardless of age. Sisters in various stages of that "mysterious process of formation" have much to learn from their older sisters in community, especially from those who have reached the later years of their lives.

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This conviction, woven into the very fabric of the community's life, is reflected in our plan for forming the young, and in subsequent stages of ongoing formation. Each of us is being prepared for these culminating years of self-gift, which our *Ratio* calls us to regard as "the self-emptying that comes with increasing age and infirmity, ...the necessary next step in the pilgrimage to the Father's house." It is a pilgrimage we are making together, at whatever stage we find ourselves; and so it is natural that we help one another along the way.

The Sap that Gives New Fruits

Every religious community knows in its life those occasions that somehow touch the very heart of its being. Perhaps one such occasion that communities have in common is the celebration of the funeral of a sister, a time which can be a peace-giving blend of sorrow, healing, and joyful hope. It has become something of a tradition in our community to follow the funeral Mass with a community meal, toward the end of which we are invited to offer memories or favorite stories about the deceased sister. In recent years I have noticed a lovely detail that at first somewhat surprised me: not only the deceased sister's contemporaries or those who served with her over the years bring their stories, but postulants, novices and young professed do so as well. At times our young ones offer insights the rest of us may not have discovered.

"[T]he dreams of elderly are imbued with memory, and [are] therefore fundamental for the journey of the young, because they are the roots." said Pope Francis in a recent address. "From the elderly comes that sap that makes the tree grow, makes it bloom, gives new fruits."

The fact that the initial years of formation take place at our Motherhouse brings the unique blessing of interaction between the very young

From *Ratio Institutionis*...

"The presence within community of the sisters in these later years of profession is a much-needed gift in the life of the congregation.... [T]hey are a leaven and a vital source of strength for the community. They are called to teach by their example and to be convinced that their daily lives, the suffering they may experience, and their perseverance can more and more become a way of preaching."

"During these later years of her religious life the sister finds that not only must she, of necessity, receive mercy and compassion, but she herself is able to give mercy and compassion in new ways. Older sisters depend on the compassionate love, attention and assistance of the younger, while the younger sisters rely on the older sisters' prayer, example, interest and the practical, down-to-earth wisdom of their conversation. The mutual support and presence to one another is a source of hope and joy: "The elderly provide a witness, wisdom and prayer which are a constant encouragement to the young...."



Sister Regina (above, center) chats with Sister Mary Michael (left) and Sister Mary Ruth (right).

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in community and the elderly and infirm. Such opportunities become unexpected times of growth for both, as the journey of the young intertwines with that of the elderly. Whether in a day's routine encounters or in personal visits to the infirmary, the young experience for themselves the sturdy spirit of the older; but they also begin to witness first-hand the quiet struggle to accept the stripping that aging brings. The young feel drawn to extend themselves in listening, encouraging words and shared laughter. At times the interaction takes the form of musical entertainment, feast day parties or holiday decorating together. The privilege of being regular "wheelchair drivers" has become a coveted role for the young professed who take infirm sisters to daily Mass and community prayer. The brief ride to the chapel becomes a chance to swap prayer intentions or chat about the day's events. Driver and passenger develop a subtle, indefinable bond that bears new fruit within both.

The latter years in their religious lives allow the older sisters their own distinctive ways of giving themselves, unconsciously serving as an example and inspiration for the younger. The determined efforts to regain her speech made by a sister recovering from a stroke are not lost on the young one who stops by to visit; nor does a novice miss the spunky example of the retired sister who regularly spends her morning's energy helping in the kitchen or laundry. The knack for storytelling about years past is a special gift that ripens with age, one by which the older sisters keep alive the collective memory of the community and share their joy and wisdom with its newer members.

In the journey from "me" to "us," so vital at any stage of human and spiritual formation, young, old and "in between" meet and help one another to keep going.

Givers of Care – Givers of Self

"....[R]eligious who take care of the elderly give evangelical credibility to their own institute as a 'true family convoked in the name of the Lord'"

Ratio Institutionis

Sister Laurentia was a near-contemporary of Sister Mary Jeanne. For as long as many of us my age could remember, she was responsible for the infirmary at our Motherhouse. Already when she entered she had the reputation of being a skillful, efficient and accomplished nurse. Everyone in the community trusted that Sister Laurentia would know what to do, and would do it quietly, kindly and with unpretentious compassion. It was the way she went about everything. Her presence and her manner set the atmosphere in our tiny infirmary, and for over twenty-five years her skill and hard work ensured that we could provide quality care for our sisters at home. As I came to experience her patience, her kindness, her calm and quiet attention to each individual, an unexpected personal desire began to grow in me: not to be a nurse, mind you, but to be like her.

By the time Sister Laurentia herself required full-time nursing care, our infirmary had been relocated to another wing of the Motherhouse where



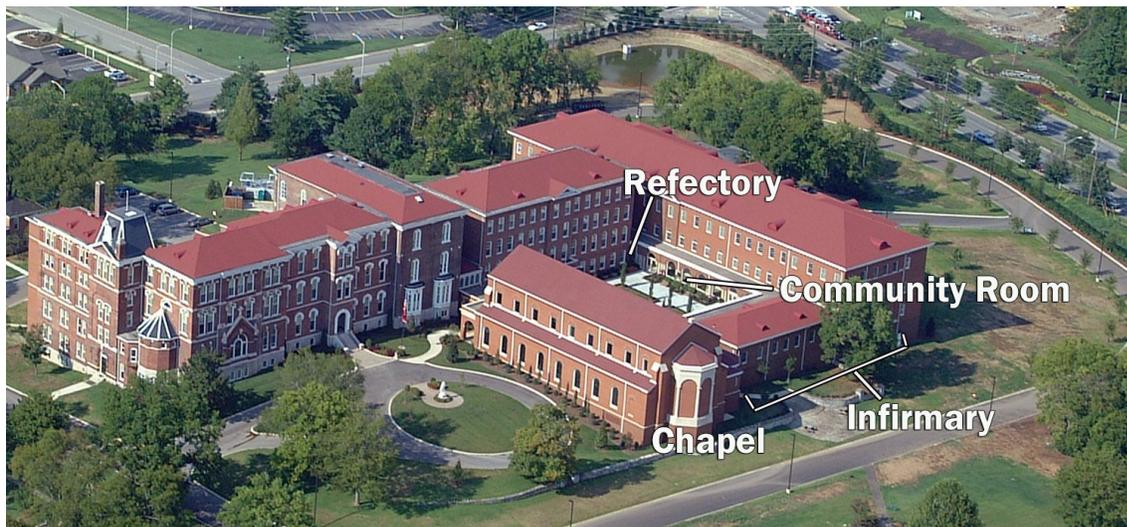
From left, Sister Maria Faustina, Sister Perpetua (Infirmary) and Sister Mary Leonard enjoy a summer community gathering in the Motherhouse courtyard.

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more room was available. She was bed-ridden then, and could use none of her characteristic active skills; but she had ever-so-subtly (without really meaning to) left the mark of her characteristic example. The younger members of the community assigned in her place instinctively imbibed something of her attentive way of giving herself to persons who were her own sisters, not simply giving healthcare. By integrating the nursing care she gave into the religious life she lived, Sister Laurentia had unconsciously set a standard for the role of community caregiver. It was a beautiful bequest.

Caring for our Own

Improved methods and means of skilled health care and advances in medicine have been obvious factors influencing our community's more recent decisions related to care of our sick and elderly within the setting of our Motherhouse infirmary. The late 1970's saw the community providing formal training for sisters who exhibited personal gifts as caregivers. As time went on, this initial step took additional directions, consistent with other community needs. Gradually a small number of sisters were educated as nurses, and in 2001 a sister graduated from medical school, completing her residency in 2004. Several young women whose background was in nursing entered the community over time as well. Though the community's educational apostolate also benefited from having sisters educated in these areas, a primary



Motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters of Saint Cecilia, Nashville, Tennessee. The infirmary is centrally located for easy access to the chapel, refectory and community room.

consideration lay in having the capacity to provide quality care for our elderly and infirm within the context of our own religious community. The ability to have our own sisters as the primary caregivers has proven to be a blessing.

In 2003, as we began serious planning for long-awaited construction and renovation at our Motherhouse, one facet of need which drove the design of the new addition was that it include a new infirmary. Our dream was to ensure a setting that kept its home-like atmosphere and integrated these sisters as much as possible into the life of the community. At the same time we wanted to improve and update provisions for their care. Consultation within and outside community followed, as we sought input from our own sisters, from other religious communities, and from health care professionals. The result was that even the design and placement of the new infirmary was a statement about the place of our elderly and infirm sisters in the life of the community, and the community's life in them. Located on the main floor of the Motherhouse, within close and

To Walk with Ever Growing Strength, continued



Impromptu community gathering during summer Community Days on the stairs leading to the Motherhouse Chapel

and James S. Powers make a striking assertion related to care of the elderly at the end of life. Discussing compassionate care of the dying, they emphasize that, "...should there really be no other procedures or interventions to perform, or medications to prescribe, we still cannot say there is 'nothing more [that can be done]', for there is always room for greater love for the one who suffers."

easy access to chapel, refectory and community room, the infirmary is clearly "in our midst."

At present seven of our sisters reside full-time in our infirmary, which has a capacity for twenty. Additional accommodations are provided on a nearby floor for sisters with physical limitations.

The singular blessing that is ours in being able to have older and younger so readily present to one another in community does, of course, require that that we all grow in mutual sensitivity, understanding, and simple patience. This, too, is ongoing formation of the most valuable kind. Not all of us are caregivers in the formal sense; but our innate feminine capacity to "give care" to the other person can be refined in the daily give and take of community, especially where differences in age call forth sensitivities in us as yet untapped.

From Culmination to Consummation

In the course of their article, "Caring for Older Adults," physicians Sr. Mary Diana Dreger, OP

For us in religious community, this "room for greater love" is the atmosphere in which the mutual giving and receiving of community life find their fulfillment. Our community's tradition at the death of a sister is most fully embodied at our Motherhouse, where it is ordinarily possible for our sisters to receive care in the final days of their lives. When it is apparent that a sister is nearing death, we begin by turns keeping watch with her in prayer and presence through the days and nights. From oldest to youngest, all who are able can participate in this sacred time, seeking to surround the sister with peace and hope in God's presence in her suffering. During these privileged days we receive from our sister, in turn, the final witness of fidelity she has to offer, as she enters into the ultimate act of handing over her life. Whatever the stage in our own journeys, it is a formative time for each of us. Every interaction, every exchange, every giving of self, find their consummation in this final one.

To Walk with Ever Growing Strength, continued

Ever Growing Strength

“Back in her day” it would have been typical of Sister Mary Jeanne not to want her age known. One would never even think of asking. Gradually, however, this personal preference changed as she and her close contemporaries in community began to reach and surpass the distinguished age of ninety. This was, of course, a different status altogether. For Sister Mary Jeanne, it meant approaching nearer a long-held personal goal: her 100th birthday. Frailty and physical limitations aside, she relished the thought of it. The whole community planned the party, for which she mustered new reserves of energy.

After this, we watched Sister Mary Jeanne’s energies take a deeper direction, as 101st and 102nd birthdays found her health steadily declining. Increasingly her desire for “God to take me” was her only energy. Watching with her, we knew that this was really “her day,” and that this longing of hers was feeding the community, giving it new strength.

And isn’t this precisely the point? From generation to generation, feeding and nurturing one another, “we walk with ever growing strength.”



From the Offices of NRRO Sister Georgette Lehmuth, OSF Education & Outreach Manager



On June 21 we will return to what we refer to liturgically as “Ordinary Time.” Yet in so many ways our life experience tells us this time in which we find ourselves is anything but “ordinary.” Perhaps, we have forgotten what ordinary even means anymore. The dictionary defines ordinary as “normal, regular, and familiar.”

Ironically, one of the buzz phrases these days is “the new normal.” For the elder members of our communities, normal has been a stabilizing factor in empowering them to age gracefully. There is a routine and regularity to their lives upon which they depend. For many of our elder brothers and sisters, the rhythm of their daily lives is centered around communal activities and religious practice. It is emotionally and spiritually painful for them to be confined and unable to participate fully in Eucharist, gather to pray, share meals, or socialize with members, family, and friends. What was once so familiar and routine is now strange and unusual.

What has not changed for our elder members and for all of us is who we are and what we have been called to be for our world. Our charism and mission are our compasses. They are the essence of our communal experience. Let us continue to find alternative communal and spiritual engagement opportunities to offer those in our care in these unusual times.

**Please share your ideas with the NRRO
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