

**PERSONAL GROWTH
AND LIFELONG COMMITMENT:
Seminars For Religious Educators
(1/2)**

Brother Justin Lucian

NOTE:

This marks the first time the **Gerontological Society** has specifically provided Program space for a religious congregation to explain its unique experience with elderly members. Since the American FSC Region has had several years of retreat-seminars for Brothers over fifty-five this special topic was inserted into the 1993 **Southern Gerontological Society's** meeting in Richmond, Virginia, USA, 28 April - 2 May. In the official Program this topic of Christian Brothers and their response to adult development and aging was listed under the general heading of "Minorities."

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BACKGROUND.

There is a well-recognized need among religious educators, Brothers of the Catholic Church, Sisters and Priests, to examine the aging process as well as the value and contribution of human life in the later years. Having used a human development strategy in three 3-week residential seminars, (July 1987, 1989, and 1992), we now present here an overview of the program operated by the Brothers of the Christian Schools of the United States.

The so-called Senior Brother Program is entitled **Fifty-Five Alive**, because the American Association of Retired Persons has made that title known and acceptable, and because so many American Brothers are members of that Association. The subtitle of the Brothers' seminar is **Adult Development And Aging**, (the title of the excellent Wiley Co. text by Marion Perlmutter for which Justin Lucian was a manuscript reviewer). All Christian Brothers of the U.S. and Toronto Regions over fifty-five years of age were invited, as were members from the English-speaking countries where the Christian Brothers have educational institutions.

The first two retreat-seminars were held in the delightful surroundings of the Christian Brothers' Retreat Center in Napa Valley, California. In July 1992 the site was the Christian Brothers' Center on beautiful Ocean Road in Narragansett, Rhode Island. Both places offered spacious grounds for strolling, opportunities for excursions, excellent buffet meals, private rooms, comfortable, well-lit conference rooms – all most important when selecting a seminar site for seniors. The staffs have consisted of psychologists, a medical doctor, a liturgist, experts in spirituality, in addictions, (and in 1992, a masseur!). The participants are all male. We have had women psychologists and spiritual directors on the staff. The present writer has been the director-lecturer at the programs with the happy assistance of fellow Brothers in the many details inherent in organizing and administering such a complicated operation familiar to any who have done live-in retreats.

THE PROCESS.

The needs of older religious, men and women, are becoming more and more prominent as the demographic profile changes. These religious are living longer, working longer, and enjoying a healthy, healthful old age. The application of modern gerontological research to the needs and concerns encountered by older religious is the theme of the **Fifty-Five Alive** seminar-retreat concept. The program is referred to as a seminar in the sense of a short course in which all participants are expected to contribute to the group's discussions and written conclusions. It is a retreat in the sense that the daily time-table allows for meditation, vocal prayer, Mass and quiet spiritual reading. We are convinced the program should be rooted in continual growth and development, and that religious formation and ministerial involvement are interconnected and involve a lifelong process and commitment.

For this reason, and right up front, we emphasize coming to terms with the rest of our lives. We focus on remembering, rejoicing and renewing, so the "good old days" are brought out into the light of the nineties and discussed thoroughly with endless reminiscing about our early formation and events that followed, especially those of the sixties and Vatican II. The retreatants are encouraged to tell their stories, put their religious vocation in as much perspective as possible. We try to build on the belief that future-orientation as well as past-embracing and present-accepting are crucial to maintaining physical and mental health in later adulthood. These ideas may be new to men who for forty years have been teaching five high school algebra classes and coaching baseball, or correcting English compositions each night after debate club practice, or lecturing on the brain in biology or psychology, with summers off to study more and more.

These enthusiastic educators are constantly engaged solely in schoolwork in a religious order devoted mainly to education they are eager to share one-on-

one and in small peer-groups their significant personal and communal concerns about their work and their community living. Issues get clarified, old ideas examined, and new behaviors become possible, even probable. As the morning lectures cover the physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of aging, the evening discussions become involved and energized. We make a conscious effort to embrace the task of personally coping with loss, diminishment, and aging. Christian Brothers generally are prone to frankness, honesty and practicality in their discussion sessions. (They also enjoy Desert Day, a traditional retreat day of aloneness and silence).

The course outline of lecture/discussion topics and the actual course content comes from numerous Christian Brother publications, from the journals of the **Gerontological Society of America** and the **American Counseling Association**, and typical college gerontology texts. We encourage the personal acquisition of Perlmutter's "Adult development and aging"; "Life in the afternoon" by Notre Dame's Edward Fischer; and "Retirement success" by Richard Johnson. Each participant is presented with a large number of handouts for personal and community use.

COURSE CONTENT.

- The first lecture introduces the definition of **geropsychology**, a concept we use throughout.

It is important to understand the multi-disciplinary nature of the work at hand. We illustrate with overheads the "squaring" of the population pyramid which depicts in graphic form the world-wide trends in longevity and the population growth in hi-tech societies as well as among religious orders. During the forties and fifties a broad base of Novices and young Brothers supported successively smaller tiers of veteran religious. Now the number of the elder Brothers has greatly increased, (better medical care, improved diet, interest in physical fitness, etc.), and the numbers of new entrants has dropped dramatically. Since 1950 the number of Americans sixty-five and over has more than doubled! The average age of all Christian Brothers is 59. (The median age for Sisters is about 65. Only four percent of all Brother orders are under

thirty years of age). In this first topic we look at "disengagement" of the elderly under the heading of "deceleration," not "retirement."

- In the second phase we ask the question, "Are you psychologically ready for retirement?"

This includes discussion questions like "Do you have friends outside of your school duties?" and "Do you stay in school/office after hours or on week-ends?" Everyone fills out a *Worry Scale* and a *Pleasant Events Scale*, (*The Gerontologist*, N°. 1, 1991). "Making new friends; being at the beach; camping." Then we refer to the Pre-Retirement Planning Checklist prepared by the Association for Adult Development and Aging and E. Chasen, 1988.

- During the third presentation on the **Locus of Control** factor we consider how elder religious were trained in learned helplessness, while being considered "modest," and "obedient."

A certain mature assertiveness must now be superimposed on early "acceptance of the will of God". In this discussion we emphasize Functional Age versus Chronological Age and introduce topics such as split brain functions, (right and left hemispheres), mature intelligence quotients, senescence, and the personal and official documents requiring decisions NOW, such as last will and testament, burial/funeral arrangements, etc.

- The fourth element in the three-week live-in experience is **Health**.

This centers around the nature of wellness and stress and strength, which is defined as the effect or influence stress can have on our health. Using our own work on stress, (*Systematic Desensitization*, National Book Co.), and its appearance in community, we examine and debate the signs: smoking in residences, trivial community "meetings," alcohol abuse, and communication gaps. We discuss stress management, relaxation techniques, meditation, and other satisfying methods of coping with the stressors of day-to-day community living.

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