

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

**Brother Justin Lucian**

- The **fifth** element, **Security**,

deals little with the personal accumulation of retirement funds, and more with the understanding of personal responsibility for the use of the monies available: various pensions plans, Social Security, and a simple life style. The elder teaching Brother, having terminated his classroom reign of many years, or having fulfilled several terms as administrator and civic leader, must be enabled to maintain his self-esteem in old age. His need for self-affirmation remains and he must be made to feel secure, psychologically and spiritually, as well as financially. It is quite common to find that Christian Brothers know very little about the source of funding for their life after retirement from active school work. A typical **Fifty-Five Alive** participant sincerely trusts he will always be taken care of and inquires little into the means that may make the care possible.

- At the **sixth** factor in adult development and aging we review Erickson's **stages of psychosocial development** relative to possible crises/concerns.

We fill out and discuss questionnaires dealing with our own **Quality of Life** with a view to how we will feel about ourselves at 85 or 90 years of age. "I want to go for rides; I want to remain socially aware," are typical issues the Brothers foresee.

- The **seventh** factor.

You would think that a well-educated group of professional religious educators would be capable of handling questions regarding "**the meaning of your life and your aging**." While they realize their lives have been fulfilling, rich, full and significant as Christian teachers, their interest in this topic lies in possible

behaviors and responses during the stages of **dying**. We directly confront the life expectancy charts and colorful Positron Emission Tomography (PET) Scans showing fearful dementia. Seeing a picture of an organic brain disease next to a normal brain has a sobering effect on the most sophisticated professionals. We all know about the many new ethical questions which arise each year relative to life-sustaining treatment. Every participant receives a blank Living Will and Power of Attorney form, and a Bill of Rights For the Terminally Ill Patient.

- **Topic eight:** the use of **Leisure**.

Male religious educators in today's world would have ample time for leisure if they knew how to use it. But the old school (pre-1965) decried "wasting" time on personal, pleasureable activities. So part of the seminar has to be devoted to airing the idea that doing nothing is sometimes okay. For these very active men, (physically and intellectually), the proper use of leisure must be learned and practiced. Religious orders harbor many workaholics. In this seminar we encourage the men to have a long-range personal plan which takes into consideration their skills, interests, values, needs, motivations and dreams. Using Rand McNally and other sources, we isolate some of the best places to retire, and list the areas where America's healthiest people live. Remember we said these aging religious are practical! We teach the acceptability of leisure through prayer and meditation, guided imagery, ('...imagine in your mind's eye relaxing on your favorite beach..."), and the exchange of personal experiences. Most of the men have been happily alive, filled with *joie de vivre*, creative and optimistic about their future leisure years.

- Our **ninth** topic, **Adaptability**, introduced the degree of personal flexibility exercised in a given situation.

The opposite, inflexibility, was characterized by living the past. We emphasize, living fully in the present, anticipating next weekend by planning now, and taking responsibility for initiating communal events. As a matter of fact, of course, most of today's religious have been flexible enough to have become survivors in a life style abandoned by the majority of their former colleagues. Today's elderly religious has demonstrated adaptability during changes in the religious life and has survived significant changes in optional clothing, prayer styles, school-related disciplines, internal election of authority figures, etc. Our retreatants have exhibited flexibility in being relocated, closing schools where they formerly served, and carrying on in a healthy manner after losing friends/family while experiencing auditory and visual diminishment over the

years. We discussed what these senior citizens would have changed in their lives, and answered questions about their present neighborhood versus a proposed new house in different surroundings. A values meditation on adaptability began with incomplete sentences like: "I wish I could be similar to...; I wish I had one more chance to..."

- A final, **tenth**, presentation deals with in-house **community** topics.

The Community Issues factor is defined as the *sum total* of the compatibility, companionship, support and satisfaction derived from a lifetime of vowed brotherhood. By this time in the program the participants are prepared to propose and defend various retirement policies and guidelines which differ from District to District throughout the Region of U.S. and Toronto. (The on-going reunification of the Mid-West districts may facilitate coordinating Aging Policies in the new future). Retirement policies and deceleration practices are similar, of course, but allow for local custom, long-held traditions, and historical evolution of each area. Many of these discussions are actually informal table conversations. Some are open forum exchanges where a peer-moderator directs the ebb and flow of remarks, some of which are not always complimentary of the existing regulations.

Now that each District has some type of life development committee one can observe concerted efforts being made to animate and support the Senior Brothers in the *Troisieme Age* as they move inexorably toward self-actualization. Present and future leaders in religious orders will continue to study and read and apply gerontological research so that their older confreres will experience this period of their lives as a "source of rejoicing." (*Guide for Formation*, General Council, 1991, #292). It is most apparent that the Brothers' custom of the District Day, (and other types of formal and informal gatherings, such as Jubilees), a sort of company-sponsored convention with a theme, is based on sound psychology. It has become clear that the perception of the quality of one's social support predicts physical and emotional health.

A final exercise is a writing project in which each man submits a list of things he is *still learning*. Sample: "I am still learning to accept myself, the real me, with successes and failures;" "I am still learning to make decisions and choices on a daily basis unconstrained by what I **am supposed** to think and do..."

## SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS.

After three very intensive weeks of total immersion into practical gerontology the men are alert to the issues and concerns of the aging male religious educator. They have done a good bit of guided and unguided reminiscing. They know what is involved in their own happiness and probably resolve to remain active as long as possible, often around an established Brother's school. The typical participant now has substantial proof that laughing releases pleasant-feeling beta endorphins and that his confreres have stockpiles of jokes and stories and the stamina to repeat them often. He resolves to practice stress reduction techniques, drink moderately if at all, and realize it is healthful to need friends. He is not so afraid of memory loss, knows more about how others pray, and believes there actually is a spirituality of aging.

Christian Brothers, and I suppose, adult educators in general, appreciate scholarly presentations that are unpretentious and practical, direct and insightful. Written evaluations of these seminar-retreats always emphasize that the several presenters must have inside knowledge of the male religious community and its specific mission and spirit. Religious are anxious for information about their *Troisieme Age*. But they are quite selective about the manner of presentation of that information. The instructional and human services staffs at each of the three **Fifty-Five Alive** retreat-seminars have found the experience encouraging and fulfilling. It is three weeks of continual live-in examples of vital, dedicated lives, open and generous, loving and devoted. The leadership responsibility is awesome and sometimes stressful. But it is usually *eustress*. ●

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*Brother Justin would especially like to acknowledge a great debt of gratitude to his coworkers in Fifty-Five Alive retreats: Brothers James Riordan, Tom Westberg and Richard Moratto.*

*This article and its presentation at the Gerontological Society's Richmond, Virginia meeting 29 April 93, is lovingly dedicated to the intrepid men of the three **FIFTY-FIVE ALIVE** retreats, and especially to the memory of Stephen O'Malley, pioneering chairman of the St. Louis District Life Development Committee.*