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*Catholic Church and Social
Problems*

**SOCIETY AND
THE AGED:
TOWARD
RECONCILIATION**

**A Statement of the
Catholic Bishops
of the
United States**

USCC

May 5, 1976
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WASHINGTON, D. C.

SOCIETY AND THE AGED: TOWARD RECONCILIATION

A STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES

May 5, 1976

I. THE AGED

1. America today faces a great paradox: It is an aging nation which worships the culture, values and appearance of youth. Instead of viewing old age as an achievement and a natural stage of life with its own merits, wisdom and beauty, American society all too often ignores, rejects and isolates the elderly.
2. In an increasingly mobile nation, where the single-generation family as well as the extended family is weakened, the elderly often find themselves cut off from their families and their communities; about 14 percent of elderly men and 41 percent of elderly women live alone or with nonrelatives. Even large numbers of elderly persons not lacking for material goods find themselves unwanted and out of place.
3. Society has come to take a negative view of the elderly. This can be seen in the increasing tendency of families to rely on institutions to care for their elderly members, and in repeated efforts by some government officials to cut services and benefits for the elderly in order to ease the burden of inflation on the rest of society.
4. Society's negative image of the elderly reinforces their own negative self-image. The result of this unfortunate process is a tragically wasted human resource. The elderly are denied their God-given right to develop their potential to the fullest at every stage of life; at the same time, society is denied the fruits of that development.
5. In rejecting the elderly we do more than perpetuate injustice: When we reject any stage of human life, we are in effect rejecting a part of ourselves and our connections with the human community. Perhaps we react to the elderly as we do because they are an unwanted reminder of our own mortality.

6. The Biblical commandment to "Honor your father and mother" (Deut. 5:16) reminds us that, above all else, the family ought to be a place of love, respect and caring for the aging members of society. But often this is not the case. Many elderly people are physically, culturally, psychologically and spiritually isolated from their families and the rest of society; equally as important, society has become isolated from this group which composes ten percent of its membership.

7. The break between generations is weakening our values as a nation and creating a form of discrimination—against the elderly—which parallels more widely recognized forms of discrimination against minorities, women, the poor or the unborn.

8. Such a wound demands healing. Such a separation calls for reconciliation. This requires a rethinking of personal attitudes in the light of gospel values. Our first task is to restore to the elderly the dignity and sense of worth which they deserve.

9. As religious people and followers of Jesus, who calls us to reconciliation and love, we must pledge ourselves, our communities, our influence and our prayers to bringing about this reconciliation between society and its elderly.

II. HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ELDERLY

10. The elderly do not forfeit their claim to basic human rights because they are old. But a brief look at the plight of many elderly people shows that they are in fact being denied those rights. The reconciliation we seek begins with recognition of our responsibilities to the elderly to insure their dignity and worth so that they can enjoy their God-given rights. As Pope John has said:

"Every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. Therefore, a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which he is deprived

of the means of subsistence through no fault of his own."

(Pope John XXIII, *Peace on Earth*)

A. The Right to Life

11. The right to life is the most basic human right in the sense of being the pre-condition for realization of all the others. But the right to life of the elderly is under constant attack, both direct and indirect.

12. On one level, the elderly, along with the sick and the handicapped, are the targets of a "mercy killing" mentality which would dispose of the unwanted. Even well-meaning legislative efforts to cope with complex questions about when and when not to use extraordinary technological and therapeutic means to preserve life pose genuine dangers, particularly since some would place fateful decisions solely in the hands of physicians or the state.

13. A more subtle, although no less serious, threat to the right to life of the elderly is a social system which, by ignoring their poverty, loneliness and despair, denies them the means and sometimes the very will to live.

14. Sociologists tell us we are nearing a time when the elderly will be divided into the "Young-Old," age 55-75, and the "Old-Old," over 75. The "Young-Old" will be a relatively healthy group, capable of entering second careers and influencing social patterns. The "Old-Old" will feel more clearly that they are simply awaiting death. As President Kennedy once said: "It is not enough to add new years to life; our objective must be to add new life to those years."

15. The elderly have a right to "new life": not just to material survival, but to education, recreation, companionship, honest human emotions, and spiritual care and comfort.

16. Finally, in reflecting upon the right to life of the elderly, one must note that in America women live longer than men. There are 143 women over age 65 for every 100 men. To talk of the problems of the elderly, then, is to talk in particular of the problems of elderly women who in their declining years may feel more painfully than ever the burdens of society's discrimination against women.

B. The Right to a Decent Income

17. The elderly, often living on fixed incomes, are among those who suffer disproportionately from society's economic ills of recession and inflation. The costs of food, medical care and housing (including fuel) have risen much more sharply than overall consumer price increases; moreover, these areas take up some 70 percent of the income of the elderly, as opposed to less than 60 percent of the income of the non-aged.

18. Some 22 percent of the elderly have incomes below the 1971 federal poverty level and half have incomes below \$5,000. Social Security and Supplemental Security Income payments, in these circumstances, remain inadequate to maintain a decent standard of living. Inflation eats away at the value of savings. Many of the elderly do not have pensions, and there are serious problems in existing pension plans.

C. The Right to a Job

19. Polls reveal that 85 percent of the American people are opposed to mandatory retirement ages, these often force able-bodied people out of their jobs when they still have much to offer and need the satisfaction of a meaningful job. Older workers are frequently forced out of work by technological change and are handicapped in seeking new employment by discrimination on the basis of age. A recession at any time may force many older workers into premature retirement which can be spiritually and financially draining.

20. Even those elderly who are not seeking remuneration for work are under-utilized: Some two million elderly Americans willing to do volunteer work do not have such opportunities available.

D. The Right to Health Care

21. Health care is a basic right, but it is often regarded as an expensive luxury. Despite passage a decade ago of Medicare, millions of elderly people still lack adequate medical care.

22. The percentage of health care costs for the elderly paid by Medicare has dropped in recent years and will probably continue to drop. Medicare does not pay for preventive health care, which means that many elderly persons will

develop health problems unnecessarily and will receive treatment only when their problems become serious.

23. In addition, Medicare does not pay for such necessities as prescription drugs, eyeglasses, hearing aids, dentures or dental care, all of which become extraordinarily expensive when measured against the income of most elderly persons.

24. Although only five percent of the elderly live in institutions, nursing home care is a serious problem. Well publicized scandals have arisen concerning the operations of some nursing homes, where patient care is sacrificed while operators amass huge profits. Large numbers of elderly people are institutionalized needlessly for want of simple services, such as visiting nurses or homemakers, which would help them remain in their homes.

25. Mental health care for the elderly is even more inadequate than physical health care. An estimated one-third of the elderly in mental hospitals are there because they have nowhere else to go. Physical illnesses such as diabetes, anemia, or simply over-medication may produce behavior patterns in the elderly which are mistaken for senility.

E. The Right to Eat

26. A 1971 Administration Task Force on Aging declared that the elderly are the most severely malnourished group in society. Poor nutrition is a major factor in the incidence of poor health among them.

27. The Food Stamp program, hot meals program and other efforts are a help to the elderly, but they still do not reach all those in need. The elderly are also threatened by new Food Stamp proposals. Some would increase the amount the elderly must pay for Food Stamps or create unreasonable assets limitations which would force them either to forfeit Food Stamps or sell their valuables, possibly their homes; other proposed regulations determining Food Stamp benefit levels could result in a decrease in benefits for many of the elderly.

28. Inadequate income is not the only reason why many of the elderly have poor diets. Lack of proper kitchen facilities, nutrition education or

simple lack of companionship and incentive to eat are also factors.

F. The Right to a Decent Home

29. America has a severe housing shortage which, like other economic problems affects the elderly more than most. Forty percent of the elderly live in homes which lack such facilities as central heating, hot water or inside toilets. (Seventy-seven percent of the elderly live in rural areas.)

30. Many elderly persons live in homes they own as the result of a lifetime of work, but are threatened with losing their homes because of waning physical strength, rising fuel and maintenance costs, and regressive property taxes.

31. Housing is particularly important to the elderly because they are often virtually trapped in their homes by lack of transportation and fear of crime.

32. Less than half of those over 65 are licensed to drive. Many, particularly those in rural areas, do not have access to mass transportation, which is often costly when it is available.

33. The elderly, particularly in urban areas, live in fear because of their particular vulnerability to such crimes as burglary and mugging, as well as "white-collar" crimes such as price-fixing and fraud.

G. The Right to Equal Treatment

34. Members of minority groups in America face special discrimination at all age levels. Minority elderly persons suffer discrimination on account of their race in addition to their age, their poverty, and often their sex.

35. A serious problem facing some minority elderly is a language barrier which may prevent them from obtaining medical and social services to which they are entitled. The same barrier may prevent them from participating in the social and recreational life of their communities and neighborhoods or the liturgical life of their churches.

III. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

36. The Church is many things—a community of faith, a community of individuals, and families

and a voice in civil society. If the Church is to help reconcile society and the elderly it must act in all these roles. The elderly look to the Church for strength and assistance. They want the Church to be a community where they experience the comfort of the forgiving Lord, and the hope of the risen Lord. The elderly need the concern, joy and presence of a caring Christian community.

A. As Individuals

37. No institutional effort can be successful unless we examine our own individual attitudes and actions. We must ask ourselves how we treat the elderly in our own families and communities.

38. Do we treat them with the respect and dignity which they deserve? Do we try to draw out the best in them and share ourselves with them? Do we carry our fair share of their financial support? Do we make an effort to try to understand and meet their special needs? Are we kind and patient?

B. As Families

39. The family is the basic unit of any community and is itself an expression of love. We cannot emphasize enough the critical role of the family in caring for their aging loved ones and keeping them in their midst as valuable, contributing members. The family is where the elderly feel most comfortable and accepted. We call on each family to weigh carefully its obligation to care for an elderly father or mother, uncle or aunt.

40. Should elderly family members require a form of institutionalization, the obligations of the family remain. Responsibility for their well being cannot be left to health care professionals and social service agencies alone. Often, only relatives and friends can provide the love and personal attention that humanize the sometimes lonely experience of institutional care.

C. As A Community

41. We take pride in the fact that the Catholic community has always made special efforts to care for the elderly; but we also acknowledge with humility that there is much still to do.

42. One valuable task which can be performed at the parish level is simply to locate the "hidden" elderly in order to bring them into parish and community life and help them obtain community and government services to which they may be entitled but which they do not receive.

43. Parish structures offer many opportunities for leadership in helping the elderly: community dining rooms, "day care," home visits and telephone reassurance services; car pools and other transportation aids; recreation; continuing education programs.

44. We must not only help continue the education of the elderly. We must guarantee effective education for all age groups about the aging process, the rights of the elderly and their potential for more active and satisfying lives.

45. Catholic hospitals and other health care institutions have a special responsibility in meeting the needs of the elderly, as do all forms of Church social service agencies.

46. More coordination of services and outreach are needed in diocesan as well as local programs. There are special needs and opportunities in the areas of low-cost housing, supervised housing, transportation and job training. Many dioceses have already sponsored low income housing programs for the elderly. We support these efforts and encourage wider participation in low income housing programs by other dioceses and religious orders.

47. The Church at all levels has a responsibility to seek out the elderly for their input into policy decisions and to provide them with opportunities for meaningful work, both as employees and volunteers.

48. The Church also must make provisions for retired priests and religious to live in a dignified manner. Special attention must be given to communities of religious women, which face particular financial hardship in caring for retired sisters. Adequate pension plans for all Church employees are essential.

D. As Public Policy Advocates

49. In this statement we have called on individuals, families, the Church, and community

groups to assist the elderly in realizing their human rights and living decent lives. We also recognize, however, that some problems require the attention of society as a whole, through legislative and governmental action.

50. We must raise our voices clearly and effectively as advocates for the elderly on public policy matters. Elderly people cannot compete with well-financed interest groups for national resources; like other basically powerless groups, the elderly stand to lose the most in times of economic crisis.

51. Many of the needs of the elderly will only be met adequately when the needs of others are met through a national policy guaranteeing full employment, a decent income for those unable to work, equitable tax legislation and comprehensive health care for all. But a number of significant steps can be taken in the interim:

- Continued opposition to euthanasia and "death with dignity" legislation which gives undue power to the state or to physicians.

- A thorough review of the Social Security system to insure its continued stability.

- Continued opposition to cutbacks or ceilings on the Social Security cost-of-living index for the elderly which reflects actual increases in their living expenses.

- Reform of Medicare to provide coverage for preventive care, dental care, prescription drugs, devices such as eyeglasses and hearing aids and increased and more readily available home health care services to allow the elderly to avoid unnecessary institutionalization.

- Establishment of stricter standards for nursing homes and strict enforcement of those standards.

- Opposition to Food Stamp program changes which would penalize the elderly.

- Expanded nutrition, education, job training and recreation programs for the elderly.

- Special efforts to meet the transportation needs of the elderly.

- More low-income housing for the elderly.

We strongly endorse continued congressional ex-

pension and administration backing of the very successful Section 202 program. We further urge that the interest for Section 202 loans be set at the lowest possible rate.

- Continued reform of the pension system, and wider availability of pensions.

- A higher priority for mental health care for the elderly.

- An end to age discrimination in hiring and flexibility in setting retirement ages.

- Special attention to programs to reduce crime against the elderly.

IV. Toward Reconciliation

52. Healing the rupture between society and its elderly members requires a major effort to change attitudes as well as social structures. In undertaking this task we are not simply meeting the demands of charity and justice. We are accepting our own humanity, our link with past and future and, thereby, our link with the Creator. To do this is to add new life to the final stages of growth because Christ said, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10:10).

Additional information on the aging, program resources and listings of useful books and audio-visual materials, have been included in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Respect Life Program, 1312 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

1976
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UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE
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Washington, D.C. 20005