



Teams of Our Lady



The Teams and their Elderly

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Equipes Notre-Dame International Leading Team

The Equipes Notre-Dame and its older members.

Introduction

In 2007 the International Leading Team set up a satellite team to study the needs of older teams and older teams members.

Disaster or golden age? There are different views about old age, but everyone agrees that the numbers of the old and the very old are increasing, particularly in developed countries

The number of the elderly in the world has increased substantially since 1950. In 2010 they will represent 1.6 per cent of the population of the world as a whole, but 4.3 per cent of that of developed countries. Over the same period Western society has come to regard death as a defeat and the process of ageing as an illness. It refuses to look death and old age in the face.

By contrast, Christians see old age as the last stage of a journey, a preparation for the ultimate meeting with God. It is marked by significant changes in the lives of the elderly, with the waning of their physical and mental abilities, increasing dependency and the approach of death, which they feel particularly sharply through the deaths of those near to them. These changes may be seen in a negative light. They in no way detract from the vocation of priest, prophet and king to which all Christians are called by their baptism, but the balance between these vocations is altered - the elderly are especially called to the prayer of the priest and the witness of the prophet. Like priests they must devote themselves above all to couple and family prayer, to contemplative prayer and to reading the Word of God. Like prophets they must bear witness to God's love and faithfulness, and hand on the ideas and values which are basic to their community.

This, then, is the paper which deals with teams members who are over 80,¹ whether couples, widows or widowers or spiritual counsellors. We will refer to them as "the elderly"². We have taken as a starting point the documents on this topic which have been produced by the teams movement, and have also conducted interviews with teams members. We do not claim to have treated the subject exhaustively because the level of the response received to our questionnaire sent to super regions has been varied. We should also point out that our satellite team is entirely made up of couples from Western countries, who have no direct personal experience of other cultures or other demographics.

¹ This age has been chosen as a kind of shorthand. In practice the work of the satellite team concerns those whose physical and mental abilities are beginning to decline so that they are forced to give up some of the activities in the Church and the community which they used to undertake.

² They are as it were our elder brothers and sisters, who have been one step ahead of us in all the stages of life and who are still showing us the way.

Initially we will look at the position of older people in society and at their vocation, before making any suggestions as to what courses of action the Movement should take.

As a second step we will draw up a paper containing suggestions which could be made to teams and to teams members who have had several years experience in the movement and who want to deepen their response to the founding charisms of the movement, irrespective of their age.³

³ This will be the satellite team's next task.

Background

Some statistics

Since 1950 the numbers of the very old have increased considerably. As table 1 below shows⁴, while the total world population has increased by 270 per cent between 1950 and 2010, the number of people aged over 80 has increased by 740 per cent over the same period. The increase in the numbers of the very old in the third world is even greater, but that is due to the fact that there were very few of them in those countries in 1950. Those aged over 80 are set to make up only 0.96 per cent of the population of third world countries in 2010 as against 4.26 per cent of the population of more developed countries. They do not have a very high profile in third world countries, whereas they cannot be ignored in the developed countries. It is interesting that this increase in the numbers of the very old in the population as a whole goes along with a significant reduction in the number of young people in many countries.

Table 1: numbers of those over the age of 80 in the population

Total population (in thousands)	1950	1980	2010	2040	2010/1950
World as a whole	2,535,093	4,451,470	6,906,558	8,823,546	2.72
Developed countries	813,561	1,083,274	1,232,457	1,256,835	1.51
Less developed countries	1,721,532	3,368,196	5,674,101	7,566,712	3.3
Over 80s (in thousands)					
World as a whole	14,407	36,028	107,114	292,578	7.43
Developed countries	8,528	22,027	52,461	102,069	6.15
Less developed countries	5,879	14,001	54,653	190,510	9.3
Over 80s (as a percentage)					
World as a whole	0.57%	0.81%	1.55%	3.32%	
Developed countries	1.05%	2.03%	4.26%	8.12%	
Less developed countries	0.34%	0.42%	0.96%	2.52%	
Proportion of world population in developed countries					
Total	32.09%	24.34%	17.84%	14.24%	
People over 80	59.19%	61.14%	48.98%	34.89%	

⁴ Figures taken from the "World Population prospect, 2006 revision, medium variant" published by the population section of the General Secretariat of the United Nations (for more detail see <http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp?panel=2>).

A "deathless" society⁵

Up to now all societies, recognising that human beings are mortal, have tried to understand that desire for a life after death which helps to give meaning to human existence and to the succession of the generations. This desire supports the endurance of social structures as the generations succeed one another and is at the basis of all civilisations.

Modern Western society has increasingly come to regard death as a defeat, and old age as an illness. Old age and death make people afraid, which is why we try to exclude them from our thoughts and our sight. This is why nowadays most people do not die in their own homes but in a hospital or a care home. The point of death becomes more and more indistinct with the increasing sophistication of the techniques of resuscitation. Moreover death is nowadays largely confined to the old, whereas formerly people were used to seeing infants and young adults die. This fosters the idea that death goes hand-in-hand with old age.

So our society uses everything in its power to make death disappear, particularly by the use of more and more complex biotechnologies, of which cosmetic surgery is an example. Some of these treatments have the aim of the postponing death indefinitely, achieving immortality on earth and celebrating an eternal youth.

The denial of death and the desire to carry on living indefinitely are naturally linked to an individualistic self-sufficiency, a refusal to procreate and a denial of any transcendental reality which goes beyond death. For someone who does not believe in a transcendental reality outside himself, the idea of death is naturally unacceptable, and all the resources of science must be harnessed to avoid it or at the very least to delay it for as long as possible. Neither God nor children have any place for this generation, which lives only for itself, but which does not understand the meaning of life. A new field of medicine, biogerontology, rejects the idea that ageing and death are natural and unavoidable processes. If one follows this line of thought, the elderly become the object of increasingly elaborate treatments, but are no longer seen as people. They no longer have any interest as individuals with a personal history which forms part of the chain of the generations. Instead they are disturbing reminders of ageing and death. The anxiety which they cause, the feeling that they serve no useful purpose, and an awareness of their cost to the country leads many younger people to favour the introduction of euthanasia. We have come a long way since biblical times, when God cursed the house of Eli in these terms: *"Be sure, the days are coming when I shall cut off your strength and the strength of your father's family, so that no one in your family will live to old age."*⁶

Journeying towards the great meeting with God: living out our mission as baptised people through all changes

"It is important to recover a true perspective, which consists in looking at life as a whole. This true perspective is that of eternity, for which each of these stages of life

⁵ This paragraph was inspired by an article by Céline Lafontaine entitled "La condition postmortelle. Du déni de la mort à la quête d'une vie sans fin" which was published in the magazine "Études" No. 4094 October 2008 and in her book "La société postmortelle" (Seuil 2008). The comments in that article are probably only applicable to western countries.

⁶ 1 Samuel 2, 31

is an important preparatory step⁷. Old age is the last earthly stage of this preparation for eternity. When they reach old age, team members experience for themselves what up to then they have only known by watching their parents or elders. Their bodies begin to fail them even if their minds remain alert. They experience dependency, the death of those close to them and loneliness. But usually they still need to belong to a community and to give some meaning to their life. They know that they are called to holiness. If the triple vocation of priest, prophet and king, which they received at their baptism, is still a reality, it takes on a new shape.

For team members who have experienced a similar progression in their working life and in bringing up their children this new stage can emphasise differences, and all the more so because age does not lead everyone to a greater flexibility in communication. But it can also create opportunities to experience the underlying insights of the team's movement in a different and deeper way.

Change in the lives of the elderly

The changes which the elderly experience in their own lives and in their relationships with others and with God do not all come at the same age, with the same speed or the same intensity for everyone. Some people approach their hundredth birthday without any marked decline in their health while others, well before they attain the age of 80, are plagued with pain or incapacity which, while not life-threatening, can be very hard to bear.

Looking at the list of changes which the elderly experience, we can get the impression that they are mostly negative and depressing. But we should keep in mind what John Chrysostom said: *"Not only do difficulties fail to destroy hope; they are its foundation"*⁸. The elderly are also challenged by St. Paul, when he says *"It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church"*⁹.

The waning of physical and mental abilities

Ageing is often accompanied by the partial loss of physical and mental abilities - the stairs seem steeper, the route to the shops seems longer, objects are heavier, print is less legible and people do not speak loudly enough. Similarly the elderly begin to have difficulty in remembering things, especially recent events.

These losses can accrue over time or arrive as a result of an illness or accident. Many elderly people go downhill rapidly after falling and breaking a limb. Some elderly people may suffer serious damage to their health, as for instance through Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease. One of a couple may be afflicted while the other tries as best they can to help their spouse to live under these difficult conditions. This fidelity in spite of difficulties, promised at their wedding, is a striking proof of love.

⁷ John-Paul II. Letter to the elderly n. 10

⁸ Sermon on the Epistle to the Romans, 9, 2, quoted in Pope John-Paul II's "Letter to the elderly".

⁹ Colossians 1, 24. Like most of his contemporaries, Christ never experienced the illnesses of extreme old age. They only became apparent our times.

Teams made up of the elderly are affected by the health problems of their members, especially when one of their number is struck down by illness or death. As the physical abilities of the team members decline they may decide to change the way they manage their team meetings - for instance, by holding them in the afternoon.

Dependency

Throughout their adult lives up to the age of 80 or thereabouts, the elderly have lived independently, any dependencies being chosen or acquiesced in. They have taken on responsibility at work, in voluntary bodies or in the political arena, they have married, brought up children and woven ties of friendship. Little by little this independence diminishes. Some begin to need help with filling in official forms or with their shopping or getting to mass or meeting friends and family; cooking becomes more difficult and it takes longer to get dressed.

So the elderly become dependent on other people, who may be their children, the staff of the care home where they live, or care workers who visit them at home. Often they become in a sense their children's children. This gives rise to several difficulties of which the most obvious arise from the way we live now, where housing is not designed to accommodate more than one generation and where women often go out to work. But there is another, more serious, difficulty. Every parent has the experience of their own childhood, the memory of which, of varying intensity, serves them as a guide for the education of their own children. But children in their sixties have no personal experience of old age, so they do not know how strongly to insist that their parents should make an effort to do something which they themselves consider so easy, but which their parents claim is impossible.

The elderly can find dependency painful when they think of the burden which they are putting on their children. They can also feel humiliated by exposing their weaknesses to their carers. These in turn must display a great deal of sensitivity and love to help the elderly accept this dependency.

For the elderly Christian, the onset of dependency can be a grace when it leads them to an attitude of surrender in preparation for their reunion with God. It is also a grace for those who encounter Christ in the elderly and through their weakness (*"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me."* Matthew 25, 35)

The approach of death

Once they have attained the age of 80, the elderly live alongside death as they witness the departure of their contemporaries. For example in France in 1998, 176,685 people born in 1917 had attained the age of 80, of which 65,648 were men and 111,010 were women.¹⁰ By 2007, 95,764 (54 per cent) of them had died, of which 43,006 (66 per cent) were men and 52,758 (40 per cent) were women. Nowadays, while the death of someone under 60 is uncommon, and is felt to be an injustice, the death of an octogenarian is part of the natural order. All the same, as

¹⁰ Representing about half the people born in 1917. Source - INSEE

Pope John Paul II says in his "Letter to the elderly"¹¹, dying is contrary to our deepest instincts, so that it is not possible to accept it as "natural".

The death of their contemporaries cannot fail to give the elderly food for thought, as they see the numbers of those with whom they can share memories of their childhood decrease, and as they feel the time of their own death draw near. But in the midst of these thoughts Christians must not forget that God "*is God, not of the dead, but of the living*" (Luke 20, 38). Many teams are made up of people of similar ages. As a result there are many widows and widowers in teams of elderly couples. For them, the death of their spouse after decades of shared life is a wound which is hard to treat.

Loneliness

The death of their contemporaries restricts the number of relationships which the elderly can have with family and friends, and it becomes more difficult to create new relationships. In addition their reduced mobility limits the times when the elderly can meet up with friends or family, and the telephone is no substitute for face to face meetings. In this context widowhood is the worst experience, particularly when it comes after long years of marriage. Moreover the elderly are often less able to participate in communal activities. So they go for long periods without seeing anyone, even if they live in a retirement home. Thus the elderly can find themselves increasingly marginalised in a society whose values are largely hostile to old age.

Availability

The elderly have long since retired from their working lives. Often they have spent a good deal of time in community activities or with their family, particularly in helping their children. But after the age of 80 they have mostly stopped their activities in the community and are beginning to find it difficult to look after their grandchildren or great grandchildren while their children are at work. They are therefore freed up for other kinds of relationship, whether it be prayer, friendship or listening to the radio or watching television. Their days take on a new dimension even though they are often slower to accomplish routine tasks.

The elderly no longer have to prove anything, whether in a work or a personal context. This is liberating and promotes serenity. They can concentrate on giving thanks for the lives they have lived. This availability can be a spiritual opportunity; the elderly are well aware that their great meeting with God is drawing near and they may often feel the need to think in a spiritual way about the meaning of their lives.

What remains

The elderly are not just bodies in the process of deterioration. They have a body but that is not all they are. Their essential being retains all the characteristics which they had in their youth.

¹¹ n 14

The need to belong to a community

When he created man, God placed him in a community as a being made for relationships and for love, in His image. (*"God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them"* Genesis 1, 27). Throughout life a person will belong to different communities - in the family or work place, in friendships and in the church. As we grow older we cease to be members of some of these groups but remain strongly attached to others, particularly to our spouses and our families. The need to belong arises from the pain of loneliness which is often a feature of old age. In the case of older teams members it frequently shows itself in a greater involvement with the movement, and the team is often one of the last communities to be abandoned.

The need to feel useful

One of the great fears of many elderly people is to feel that they are completely useless. One of the best ways of giving them a continuing interest in life is by showing them how they can be useful to those around them and to the rest of the world, whether by performing little tasks, by telling tales of their younger days to their grandchildren and great grandchildren or by praying for different intentions.

The need to find a meaning in life. The call to holiness.

People who live a very active life sometimes find it difficult to draw back in order to think about the direction in which they are going. Some do not even feel the need to do so. By contrast the approach of death lends a new seriousness to the search for meaning in life, and creates a more lively desire to live life to the full: *"the gift of life, in spite of the pain and misery which characterise it, is too beautiful and too precious for us to tire of it"*¹². For Christians, this meaning in life is the call to holiness, which the Council has reminded us is addressed to each one of us. Teams members are particularly aware that it must be lived as a couple.

The vocation of the elderly

Elderly teams members, like all other Christians, received at their baptism the threefold vocation of priest, prophet and king. These vocations are with us throughout our lives, in a form which is appropriate to each of us, but the balance between them changes as we grow older, with the changes in our physical and mental capacities. As John Paul II said in an audience which he gave to elderly people on 23rd March 1984: *"Do not allow yourselves to be overcome by the temptation to cut yourselves off. In spite of everything - the complexity of your problems, your failing strength, insufficient support from the community, the slow progress of government machinery, the lack of understanding from a selfish society - in spite of all these things, you are not, and must not consider yourselves to be on the margins of the life of the Church. Do not think of yourselves as passive entities in a too busy world, but instead as active participants in a fruitful period, humanly and spiritually, of your life on earth. You still have a mission to accomplish, a contribution to make."*

¹² John Paul II. Letter to the elderly 1999

For members of the Equipes Notre-Dame, this vocation, this call to holiness, must be lived first and foremost in and through their marriages, in accordance with the original insight of Father Caffarel. Throughout the Bible the human couple is used as an image of God and of his infinite goodness. This is particularly apparent in Genesis, with its two creation stories,¹³ but it is also to be found in, for example, the Song of Songs, in Hosea, in the Psalms, right through to the Apocalypse.¹⁴ The life of the couple is an image of God and of his loving relationship with his people, both in good times and in bad. As Vatican II reminds us, the family is a "domestic church"¹⁵. This is still true after the children have left home. The home is the primary place in which we must exercise the vocation of priest, prophet and king.

Membership of the Equipes Notre-Dame gives a special quality to this vocation, even in widowhood. Many widowed members remain closely linked to their spouse who has already returned to the dwelling of the Father. They pray with him or her and even have "sit downs" with him or her, in this way experiencing an extraordinary foretaste of the communion of saints between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven. The vocation of the elderly moves increasingly into the realm of "being" rather than that of "doing" or "having".

Priest

The priest is a man who prays, both on his own behalf and on behalf of all the people of God. He praises the Creator for his works and thanks him for the graces he has given. He intercedes for his suffering brethren. He makes an offering of his life.

The elderly, who are often less taken up with activities requiring speedy action and mobility than their juniors, are particularly well adapted to undertake this task: *"Prayer is a service. It is a ministry that older people may perform for the good of the whole Church and the world. Even the most infirm and handicapped of them can pray. Prayer is their strength, it is their life. Through prayer they can break down the walls of isolation, emerge from their condition of helplessness, and share in the joys*

¹³ "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." Genesis 1, 27.

"Yaweh God said, 'It is not right that man should be alone. I shall make him a helper.'..... Yaweh God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. And the man said: 'This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She is to be called Woman because she was taken from Man.'" Genesis 2, 18, 22-23

¹⁴ "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband." Apocalypse 21, 2.

¹⁵ Lumen Gentium, 11. See The Catechism of the Catholic Church § 1656 and § 1657:

1656 In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centres of living radiant faith. For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the Ecclesia domestica. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are 'by word and example the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child, fostering with special care any religious vocation'.

1657 It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptised in a privileged way 'by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity.' Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and 'a school for human enrichment'. Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one's life.

*and sorrows of others. An older person, confined to bed and reduced to the end of his or her physical strength, can, by praying, become like a monk, a hermit. And through prayer he or she can embrace the whole world."*¹⁶

A very disabled old man, finding he could not sleep at night, often spent the hours of wakefulness praying for one of his granddaughters who was pregnant. The doctors had told her that her baby was unlikely to be born alive. She was delivered of a healthy child on the very day of her grandfather's birthday. Although many people were praying for her, who can say that the prayers at this old man were not particularly efficacious?

*"Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I also"*¹⁷. Christ is present in a special way when a couple prays together. Elderly teams couples, who are not distracted by a multiplicity of practical tasks which they can no longer perform, can devote themselves to prayer - whether it be supplication, couple prayer or even family prayer when their children are present. The elderly can also read scripture in greater depth, whether individually or as a couple.

Elderly teams members can find it difficult to go to mass regularly, particularly on weekdays, through lack of help in getting about.¹⁸ But reciting the Prayer of the Church can help them to unite themselves with the whole Church.

Prophet

The prophet bears witness to the Word of God and the presence of his love in the world. He will of course have meditated on this Word throughout his life, in particular by reading it regularly. Elderly couples are especially called to bear witness to God's love and faithfulness, which do not abandon them when they are old. As St. Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians¹⁹, the Christian couple is the image of the union between Christ and his Church, and this vocation remains as demanding as ever as a couple ages. Even death does not bring it to an end²⁰. The example of human love, lived in fidelity to Christ over many decades, in spite of all difficulties, and even after the death of one of the spouses, can make a deep impression on young couples, living as they are in a society which focuses on the present moment and distrusts the long term. More generally, the example of grace received throughout life and the results which flow from that grace can be very significant for the younger generation.

¹⁶ From "The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World" Pontifical Council for the Laity (1st October 1998)

¹⁷ Matthew 18, 20

¹⁸ Younger friends, for example teams members, can provide transport.

¹⁹ *"Wives should be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, since as Christ is the head of the Church and saves the whole of the body,Husbands should love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her ... A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, because we are parts of his Body. This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh. This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church."* Ephesians 5, 23-32

²⁰ *"Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is strong as Death, passion as relentless as Sheol. The flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of Yaweh himself. Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown."* Song of Songs 8, 6-7.

Naturally this example is usually given to the children and grandchildren of an elderly person, but it can extend well beyond the family circle.

The elderly play a vital part in the transmission of the basic values and ideals of the society to which they belong. This vocation is especially necessary in a period of turmoil when the old certainties are being eroded. The very fragility of the elderly invites solidarity and mutual support. They can also help younger people to prepare for their own old age, and they can redress the negative image of old age which is too widespread in contemporary thought.

Finally the elderly must give an example of learning to let go; at each end of our lives we must relinquish control and trust ourselves to other people.

The example of the elderly should perhaps be transmitted more by what they are, and by the way they live, than by what they say. Their words sometimes become too slow and faltering for the impatience of youth. A young woman who is particularly sensitive in her dealings with elderly people wrote: *"I think of our 90 year-old spiritual councillor. He spent the whole of last year telling us about his preparations for going into a retirement home, and about the things he was waiting for - the results of medical examinations and a place in the retirement home. We thought he no longer gave us anything much, that he was marking time. And then I went to help him pack in readiness for his move to the retirement home. What humility, what surrender, his whole life in a few cardboard boxes! The simple turning of a page of his life, to travel towards a future which was unknown and difficult to come to terms with. I felt I now understood, that the whole year was gathered up in one afternoon. This year of waiting was a time of preparation, of letting go, in readiness for this change. He did not tell us so in words, but by being himself."*

The elderly must set an example to younger generations so as to pass on their faith and their hope. But they must also set an example to their contemporaries, who may not have travelled so far on the path of faith. The Pontifical Council for the Laity says *"Far from being the passive recipients of the Church's pastoral care, older people are irreplaceable apostles, especially among their own age group, because no one is more familiar than they with the problems and the feelings of this phase of life. Particular importance is being given today, moreover, to the apostolate of older people among people of their own age group in the form of witness of life."*²¹

King

The king serves the community, giving practical support in its development and in its everyday life. This service may take different forms, whether in the family, among friends, at work, in the wider community or in the Church. With some exceptions the elderly cannot be expected to perform this service²². Instead the young will want to provide it for the benefit of the weaker members of society, such as the elderly.

²¹ The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World
Pontifical Council for the Laity (1st October 1998)

²² Among the exceptions is the devoted service which spouses render to their partner in cases of serious illness, such as Alzheimer's disease.

Mutual help, whether material or spiritual, is at the heart of the ethos of the Equipes Notre-Dame.²³ In particular it should operate reciprocally between the generation of the elderly and younger generations. "*The sunset may also be splendid*" - such is the title of a book about the fourth age of life. This book demonstrates among other things that not only can people at this stage of their lives receive a great deal from a loving and supportive environment, but also that they can give much more than you would think in return. The sunset may also be splendid - just as splendid as the dawn or perhaps even more so. For someone who believes in an afterlife this sunset, whether clouded or resplendent, is truly the dawn of another life."²⁴

What suggestions can the Teams make to their elderly members?

In the past the teams movement has taken various steps to help its elderly members. In this section we outline key initiatives already taken in various super regions, and the suggestions which the satellite team has received. These proposals are directed at younger as well as elderly teams members. We also suggests some organisational changes.

Proposals relating to older members

The teams movement must help its elderly members to live out their vocation as priest and prophet, which we have already shown are the principal roles open to them once their physical condition has begun to deteriorate. In particular it can make suggestions as to how they can adapt their rule of life to their actual situation²⁵. It can provide various practical means to this end, while taking account of their limitations.

Prayer

The elderly have a lot of practice in prayer. There is no need to teach them to pray - instead they need to be helped to widen their horizons. Their prayer should above all consist of praise petition and thanksgiving:

- praising the Father for his love and majesty, and for the wonders of his creation.
- giving thanks to the Father for all that he has given them throughout their lifetime, and for every one they have ever met... ("*And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it is for this that you were called together in one body. Always be thankful*". Colossians 3, 15)
- intercession for those who are close to them, but also for all those in the world who are suffering.

In the same way as St Teresa of the Child Jesus did with missionaries, they must link themselves in prayer with those who are working for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Sector or Super Regional couples could send a periodical prayer newsletter to their elderly members with suggestions for prayer intentions, in the same way as the Intercessors do. Asking elderly members to pray for the teams movement in

²³ See the first pages of the Charter of the Teams of Our Lady (1947)

²⁴ La Vie devant nous. Henri Bissonier. Mediaspaul 2007 p.147

²⁵ "*The Teams ask their members to ... set themselves a rule of life (the great diversity of couples does not allow the same rule to be proposed to all)*" (Charter of the Teams of Our Lady 1947).

Adapting to the situation of elderly couples will affect the endeavours - for example the sit down is still essential for elderly couples.

preparation for or during gatherings (Sector days, responsible couples meetings etc) is another good way of keeping alive their links with the wider movement.

Specific study topics

The teams movement already provides study topics aimed at particular age ranges. According to the review carried out by the Super Regional team for France Luxembourg Switzerland²⁶ for 2006 - 2007, elderly members did not do the study topics on "Parents of today's adolescents", on sexuality or on scriptural poverty nor, naturally, the material for new teams. According to this review, older teams were particularly interested in the topic "A Great Love Awaits Me", which had been specially drawn up for elderly members²⁷, as well as in study topics based on scripture such as "Master, explain to us"²⁸. Reading the encyclical "God is Love" was also popular.

The study topic "A Great Love Awaits Me" was originally published in 1998 and was reprinted in 2006. Aimed particularly at very old teams members, it was conceived as a celebration of life and marriage, as an encouragement to continue on the path to holiness and as an example set by elderly members to the generations that come after them. It is divided into two main sections: "Other people and ourselves" and "God and ourselves", and has supplements dealing with practical issues. It originated in France, but is also distributed in Belgium.

The Oceania teams have produced a study topic "The Third Age", drafted in Australia in 2008, and aimed at the newly retired and young grandparents, but which also addresses issues of concern to the elderly and to teams members confronting declining health and the trials of mourning, particularly isolation and bereavement. The approach of this study topic is perhaps more practical and psychological than spiritual and intellectual. The underlying theme, based on the work of a psychologist, is that the third age is the last stage in the personal development of an individual: it becomes a challenge for each of us. The questions are very open and teams members are encouraged to adapt the topic to their own situation.

Based on this limited survey, the satellite team proposes that study topics aimed particularly at elderly members should be drawn up. We suggest the following:

- Scripture study topics, possibly concentrating on older biblical characters
- Studying John Paul II's "Letter to the Elderly", the document produced by the Pontifical Council for the Laity and other Vatican documents on this subject.
- Study topics addressing the practical situation of the elderly, incorporating some or all of the following ideas:
 - The experience of change: to identify the things that alter in the lives of the elderly, whether affecting their physical mental or spiritual capacity. The aim

²⁶ http://www.equipes-notre-dame.fr/images/stories/themes/bilan_quantitatif_2007_2008.jpg. In fact this review does not refer to the elderly, but to older teams, which are likely to be made up of older members.

²⁷ A related topic, "Time of Hope", is aimed at retired couples. The Belgian teams also suggested the topic "Stay with us – the evening is drawing on" for this last age group.

²⁸ Based on a book by Fr. Marcovits o.p., spiritual counsellor to the Super Regional Team of France-Luxembourg-Switzerland.

would be to promote acceptance of what cannot be avoided, and to use it to grow in our journey towards our meeting with God.

- Suffering ageing and death²⁹.
- Loneliness and widowhood.
- Marriage and ill-health. Elderly couples often have to deal with the illness of one partner. The international gathering in Lourdes in 2006 provided an opportunity for some couples in this situation to share with healthy couples the effects of illness on their spiritual lives.
- The sacrament of the sick: for our older members this sacrament is still "extreme unction", the sacrament which presages the imminent approach of death. Even among practising Catholics this description makes the sacrament unpopular. A better understanding would allay these fears.
- The relationship between different generations, especially in connection with the following questions:
 - What example can we give to our children and grandchildren who have moved away from the Church?
 - How do we talk to our children about our own death?
- Dependency.
- Achieving serenity and a state of grace, and maintaining our faith and our hope, in spite of the limitations imposed on us by old age, suffering and ill-health.

Meeting and witnessing

Gatherings, whether of the elderly alone or of a mixture of elderly and younger people, are special places for the exchange of views and for testimony. However the sometimes variable health of the elderly can disrupt the planning of meetings, and they are often uncomfortable in large and noisy groups where they cannot always hear what is being said.

Special provision should be made for the elderly at Sector Days, adapted to their needs and subject always to what is practicable. Mixed team meetings might at times be organised so as to give priority to mixing the generations and at other times to putting people of similar generations together. Elderly members might be asked to welcome younger teams couples newly arrived in their area. They could give them information about the neighbourhood and at the same time share with them the benefits they get from belonging to a team.

Retreats or pilgrimages aimed at the elderly could be organised, as is done for teams members on the verge of retirement, provided that there are enough elderly people in the area in question, in view of the difficulties they might have in travelling. Pilgrimages for couples where one member is unwell and for healthy couples would be particularly rewarding. All these interactions would give the elderly the opportunity to set an example to younger teams members:

- of love and fidelity, particularly when one partner has health problems (*"It is in ill-health that we experience the strength of marriage and fidelity, and its limits... it can be a spiritual experience"*)³⁰,

²⁹ In 2009 the Waterloo team (Belgium) drew up a study topic on this subject based on their 35 years together and on the Book of Job.

³⁰ From the replies given by a young team member in response to a questionnaire put out by the satellite team.

- of the importance of communicating (the sit-down).
- of long-term commitment (for life): the Equipes Notre-Dame is one of the few movements in the Church in which one can engage for all or almost all of one's life. Typically people engage in other services such as RCIA or preparation for confirmation for 10 years or so.
- of mutual support
- of the founding charisms of the movement, and of how to apply them in practice. This can be particularly striking when it is given by people some of whom have lived through the early years of the Equipes Notre-Dame.

The elderly could bear witness outside the teams movement, in ways which would need to be worked out, depending on the needs and on their abilities. They could also bear witness through the written word by writing articles for the various journals of the movement (such as regional and sector newsletters) or for their parish or diocesan magazine.

Practical suggestions

Modern technology can help with some handicaps. For example, the study topics aimed at the elderly might be printed in a large typeface, or distributed on an audio disc.³¹ The telephone, which is increasingly available, can help to dispel loneliness, as can communicating over the internet, once the elderly have learnt how to use it.

Suggestions aimed at other teams members

Our suggestions for younger teams members are the counterpart of those directed at the elderly. Younger teams members in particular should be asked to support the elderly. They could help them to attend gatherings organised by the movement, especially sector days; they could visit them and help them with their day-to-day concerns, including bringing communion to them when they can no longer go to mass. They could also show them how to use modern information and communication technology. The relationship between young and old could develop into one of "adopted grandparents". As people become more mobile, grandparents often live far away from their grandchildren and young people in their turn and are separated from their grandparents. Putting such families in touch with each other may benefit both.

Study topics might be prepared which deal with the relationship between the generations and with elderly parents (How do we cope with dependency and its progress? How should we talk about it with our parents and with our siblings?).

Organisation

In the individual team

A team made up of elderly people must adapt itself to the physical and mental abilities of its members. Thus team meetings could be held during the day, sharing

³¹ We notice, for example, that you can listen to the ERFLS Newsletter by downloading a podcast from the super-regional website,

lunch rather than dinner, to enable members to travel in daylight. They could also be conducted at a more measured pace than the meetings of younger teams, who have to keep to a tighter schedule. Some teams always hold their meetings at the home of the couple who have the greatest difficulty in getting about. In one case the meeting begins with mass, and this is the only time in the month when the most handicapped member of the team gets to hear mass. In such a case either there is no shared meal, or the members of the team take it in turns to prepare the meal. Transport to team meetings needs to be looked at carefully. Sometimes it would be appropriate to ask younger teams members to help.

In sectors and in the structure of the movement

One of the chief concerns of those with responsibility in the movement, particularly sector couples, when dealing with elderly couples, is how they should help them to continue to live the spirituality of the Equipes Notre-Dame when they see their own team progressively disintegrating³². In many places teams are largely made up of people of similar ages. So the members of a team all reach an advanced age at the same time. Such a team is seriously affected by the ill-health and death of its members, and it becomes difficult to open it up to younger members who have not travelled the same path together. Sometimes the surviving members of the team can be incorporated into a slightly younger team, but this is rare, and when it is done, the younger members are in practice excluded from the wider movement at a time when they have the greatest need of its support. All levels of the movement must therefore consider what steps they should take to satisfy the needs of the surviving members of the oldest teams. This could be done by:

- revisiting the policy of creating teams of couples of similar ages. We could perhaps incorporate 60 or 70 year-olds in teams of 80 or 90 year-olds. The younger members could help the older, and they would have interests in common.
- alternatively, by creating special links for elderly members threatened with de facto exclusion from the movement by the dissolution of their teams. It would be a kind of twinning - a younger team, or even one couple from such a team, would be matched with an elderly team or couple. The young ones would update the older ones on the life of their team, would include them in their prayer intentions and would share their thoughts on the current study topic with them. With practical help from the younger ones, the older ones could attend some team meetings or sector days. This twinning would also provide a good opportunity for the elderly members to share the benefit of their experience with the younger members. This sharing need not be limited to teams matters, but could be widened in to more mundane and practical assistance. For example the elderly members could show their town to younger members newly-arrived in the area, and the younger ones could go shopping for the elderly, or take them communion when they cannot get out. It is in the context of such an informal twinning that the elderly can instruct the young, by what they are rather than by what they say. Of course liaison couples have a vital role to play in linking teams which have a high proportion of elderly members with the movement. They must

³² In France, the generation of 80 year-olds is under-represented in the Teams relative to their numbers in the population as a whole.

continually reassure them that the movement loves and needs them, if necessary by visiting each couple in turn.

It goes without saying that the newsletter must continue to be sent out to such elderly members as want to maintain their links with the movement³³. They will enjoy reading it all the more if it contains articles aimed specifically at their age group, especially those describing initiatives for their benefit taken in different sectors or regions. Some super regions could consider issuing a supplement to their newsletter for widows and widowers, addressing their particular situation. Since the elderly will form an ever-increasing section of the population, it would be a good idea for the different levels of the movement, from sector team to the International Leading Team, to appoint a couple with specific responsibility for the elderly, and for the task of establishing links with them. A network of such couples with responsibility for the elderly could be set up, using the internet to keep in touch. Since the problems of the elderly affect the whole of the Church, this network should also maintain links with those in the Church who are responsible for the pastoral care of the elderly, to share experiences, and to be able to advise teams members about the activities offered by other movements or organs of the Church.

³³ Even if they do not belong to an active team.

Conclusion

*"To accompany older people, to approach them and enter into relation with them, is the duty of us all."*³⁴ This recommendation of the Pontifical Council for the Laity speaks fittingly to the teams movement and to all its members irrespective of age.

The younger members of the movement are encouraged to help the elderly live out their old age joyfully, praying and bearing witness to the love of God. Accepting this help, the elderly in their turn can bring their own contribution to the development of the movement in the Church.

Again, as the Council says, *"The elderly person must become more and more aware that he or she has a future to build, for the missionary duty persists. It consists in witnessing to little ones, to youth, to adults, and to people of their own age that without Christ there is no meaning or joy, whether in one's private life or in relationships with other people"*.

In this way, by knowing how to ask them for the help which they are capable of giving, the Teams will show that old age can make it possible to live a fulfilling and dedicated life, surrendering more and more to the love of the Father and preparing joyfully to meet him.

³⁴ The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World
Pontifical Council for the Laity (1st October 1998)

Suggested initiatives

The teams movement has a responsibility to help its older members to live this last stage of their lives to the full. The satellite team makes the following suggestions:

- From time to time, send elderly members a newsletter on the subject of prayer, not so much to instruct them how to pray, but rather to widen their horizons with the intentions of the Church as a whole, whether in thanksgiving or intercession (page 14).
- Draw up a study topic focused on the particular needs of elderly members - for example on scripture or on the practical aspects of dealing with old age (page 15).
- Encourage contacts between elderly members and their contemporaries and younger generations, for example by asking them to welcome teams members visiting or settling in their locality (page 16).
- Consider adapting teams documents to make them more usable by elderly members - for instance, the study topics could be issued in large print editions or by way of a voice recording on tape or CD (page 17).
- Encourage older and younger teams members to help each other (page 17).
- Draw up study topics which encourage younger teams members to support the older members (page 17).
- Help older teams to adapt to the physical and mental condition of their members (page 17).
- Consider how to encourage older members to remain in the movement when their team folds as a result of the death or illness of its members (page 18). One way to do this might be by incorporating 60 or 70 year-olds in teams of 80 or 90 year-olds. Another way might be by setting up special arrangements for older members whose teams have disbanded: in such cases a younger team could look after a team of older members or an older couple.
- Keep sending the teams newsletter to older members even when they no longer belong to a team. Make sure that the newsletter includes articles of particular relevance to older members (page 19).
- Appoint a couple at each level of the organisation of the movement with special responsibility for the needs of older members, and create a network for these couples, both with each other and with the organs of the Church which cater for older people (page 19).

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