

Elders and Orphans

I became one of the family elders in May when my mother died at age 96. My dad had died five years earlier when he was almost 91. My Aunt Rose died in February this year at 90; Aunt Catherine, in March three months shy of her 99th birthday. Mom's death marked the end of that generation. There were no more family elders. It was our turn now. How would my siblings and I ever be able to fill the shoes of these wise ones who had guided us all of our lives? How could we do it without them? We were orphans with no parents remaining from whom to seek counsel. How could we do it? How can an orphan become an elder?

In some ways it sounds silly to describe ourselves as orphans at 60's and 70's. Yet that is what we are. The voices that calmed us when we were frightened, prayed us through the good and bad times, and assured us we were loved, that we could do it are silenced. The eyes that conveyed love and pride are closed. The ears that were available to listen no longer hear. The hands that cradled us as infants, held us as we learned to walk, blessed us each time we were together, and continued to be there to guide us and buffer us as we walked through the storms of life are gnarled and gone. In a very real sense, for the first time in our lives we are truly alone and on our own. And yet we are expected to be the steady wise ones for our children and grandchildren and those who come after them.

What a tall task? How can we do the seemingly impossible? Only grace and dependence on God can make it happen. It is a process. It doesn't happen all at once. If we think about it, we learned that from watching our parents. I remember having young children, uncertain and finding my way. When I was a child and my parents were the same age as I was then, I assumed they knew it all. Could they have ever been as stumbling and questioning of themselves as I was? At that time such an idea was unthinkable. It's only as I step into this new role as

elder that I'm pretty sure that they were as uncertain and confused as we are and I am confident that what got them through was prayer and their faith in God.

We usually take on the role of elders in the later years of our lives when we begin to think about what our legacy will be. By then we have come to realize that things are not important, that what matters most is relationships. We value time and people and this softens our hearts for the role of elder we have been given. We actually are becoming wise.

This is quite a contrast to the way our society often tends to diminish the value of older people. They're seen as over the hill. It's the 18 to 35 age group that matters. They're the target for marketers of exciting new products. Those ads aimed at seniors are for "life Alerts" and incontinence products—hardly a recognition of their continuing contributions and wisdom.

At St. Leo's we are blessed to see how age is revered and looked up to by our African parishioners. When there is a problem in the community it is the elders who are sought for their insight, wisdom, and direction. When my mother was declining many of them asked to visit her. They were sure she was a person who had much to share.

As I'm pondering these things, Independence Day is approaching and I'm wondering if the children of our founding fathers struggled with some of the same things as we do. As families and as a nation, we need the wisdom of our elders.

—Angela Anno, Pastoral Associate

