

## Growing Up, Getting Old as a Nun

By Lorna Q. Israel

The young and the old are conventionally represented as both sharing the traits of frailty and dependence, immaturity and incompetence, passivity and vulnerability. If this is true, older people can be said to reflect youthful traits. Middle-aged adults, on the other hand, are supposed to mediate the needs of the young and old.

Sr. Mary certainly feels that way. She describes her present age as "the best." Her behaviour when she was in her 20s, she says, was "childish" but at 33 "I am now able to look at things from a different, more mature perspective because I am filled with so many experiences." She adds that "additional age brings with it additional experience and a new level of maturity and outlook in life."

At 18, she crossed over the threshold of adulthood by joining the Religious of the Good Shepherd (RGS), a Roman Catholic order that is active in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka. Perceived as mature, dependable and responsible, today Sr. Mary is assigned tasks that would normally be given to a more experienced nun. These include giving counselling and overseeing the physical and emotional needs of several women staying in the RGS' Welcome House.

There is a political economy behind the stereotyping of youth and advanced age, the young-and-old dichotomy. While it was and still is common to see young children making

a living like adults, social policy has intervened to prevent them from competing in the labour market through the introduction of compulsory education. While older people continue to be active, compulsory retirement has rendered them unproductive. There is an unspoken policy that the retirement of older workers opens employment to relatively younger workers. While the negative "young" and "old" stereotypes tend to magnify the economics side of it, the positive age-stereotype blurs negative connotations, shifting it from age identifier to roles and expectations, attitudes and behaviours.

Though there is no fixed age requirement in entering the congregation, the RGS prefers relatively young women. It is their belief that the formative years are the best time to prepare them for the rigour and austerity of religious life. The RGS administers several schools in Sri Lanka, in one of which Sr. Mary used to be a student active in extra-curricular activities. It was a teacher, an RGS nun, who invited the young girl to consider a religious vocation.

At present, however, the congregation finds it difficult to attract new recruits. The age of admission or postulancy has been raised from 15, when most Sri Lankans students have passed their O level, to 18, when most of them are about to enter university following completion of their A level. It seems that the youngsters are obliged to look for jobs and start earning money as a way of repaying their parents who have already invested so much in their education. Media has also been instrumental in promoting a youth-centred culture that values modernity and economic independence.

On the surface, there would seem to be no significant difference between the younger and the older nuns in the congregation, for instance in the division of apostolic work. Everyone is expected to carry out the day-to-day work of the RGS. In fact, the only sign of age difference obvious to Sr. Mary's eyes is that older nuns are addressed as "Sister," as a sign of respect, while the younger ones simply call each other by their first names. The latter, she observes, are grateful to the older nuns for their pioneering and untiring efforts to carry out the mission of the RGS.

Twenty-four years ago, authority and administration of the entire congregation rested in the hands of the Irish nuns. The Sri Lankans who later assumed leadership are now mostly in the senior bracket. Among the 482 RGS, at least a hundred are much older than the others. Despite their age, they remain active and vibrant, carrying out their daily work with competence and strength.

Today, the RGS is a respected institution in Sri Lanka. It is known for its apostolic work with women who have difficulty



photos by Tesa de Vêla

re-integrating themselves into the mainstream of society which looks down on them—the unwed mothers, prostituted women, those who have been physically or sexually abused, or any woman having problems but no one to talk to or nowhere to go. Meanwhile, young women who have been recruited from rural villages to work in export processing zones are also welcome to seek refuge in the RGS' Welcome Houses.

Such is the high regard for RGS-run schools that even non-Catholic families send their children to study there. The Sri Lankan

police, on the other hand, have made it a practice to turn over to the congregation women they had rounded up from the streets.

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The RGS' excellent reputation in Sri Lanka is attributed by Sr. Mary to the initiatives of her seniors. She also thinks that it inspires the older nuns to continue being active and live up to their religious vows.

Clearly, the older nuns embody the positive stereotypes associated with old age such as wisdom, kindness and compassion and they teach the younger nuns by their example. The RGS has devised a system that maintains the sense of community amongst its 482 members. The nuns are divided into groups composed of three or more members and each group is called a community. As a community, members live and stay together, work and pray together. This takes the place of a family set-up for most of them. (Every year, however, they are allowed a two-week vacation to rejoin their families.)

In 1995, Sr. Mary joined two other nuns, one of them 77 and the other 69. Though her provincial chose this community for her, Sr. Mary says she wanted nothing less than this one, which has been engaged in an apostolate amongst women working in export processing zones. These young women, mostly from the countrysides, commonly seek advice and counselling on how to adapt to an urban setting or how to deal with their depression

and confusion after being sexually harassed or abused.

The two older nuns feel responsible for Sr. Mary, treating her as if she were their own daughter. "They encourage me and make me feel that I'm doing just fine," she says.

With Sr. Bridget, aged 77, "I can talk about almost everything," the younger nun says. She adds that Sr. Bridget knows all about her, both her daily activities and the dilemmas she encounters, but without being judgmental or intrusive. Sr. Bridget is in charge of the kitchen, marketing and meal preparation. Despite her age, she goes about her work untiringly and enthusiastically. When she "really gets old," Sr. Bridget says, that's when she would join the other senior nuns who have formed their own community and live in the same house together.

Sr. Rose, 69, on the other hand, is the visionary one. As the superior, her vision of the future is sharp and certain. She leads the little community role with wisdom and high spirits that don't seem to decrease with the years. She is ever willing to share her experiences and foresight as a way of supporting Sr. Mary. She tries not to make the latter feel incompetent when a mistake has been made, nor does she treat her like a youngster.

Both nuns make Sr. Mary feel that she has their full attention, constantly watching her grow and bloom. She is allowed to take initiatives, to push the frontiers of her limitations and potentials. This has allowed her to overcome the barriers of age and experience.

Sr. Mary does not seem to notice that her fellow sisters have slowed down on account of their age. She actually finds it diffi-

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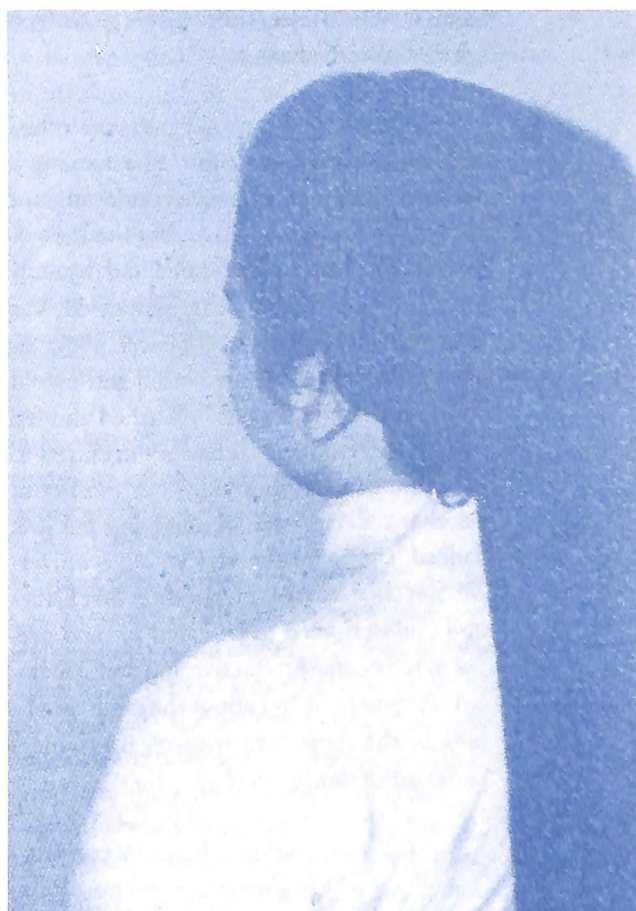
cult to treat them as elderly. On the other hand, she herself feels mature and not at all a youngster. This feeling is all the more compelling because Sr. Mary has yet to work with other nuns her own age or younger.

Srs. Bridget and Rose's fond reference to Sr. Mary's youth and vibrancy and the future role of younger nuns highlights the young-and-old duality apparent in the congregation. This, however, is played out on a more positive, albeit stereotypical, plane. Sr. Mary's zestful laughter, her ever-ready smile and her capacity for hard work make the two nuns feel young, energised and vibrant. Both Srs. Bridget and Rose believe that the future of the congregation rests with the younger nuns. Hence, they take every effort to give the latter advice and guidance, inspiring them with stories from their younger years.

It is the congregation's responsibility to take care of its older members. Going back to their birth family upon retirement is out of the question. For one, parents may have died by then while their other relatives may also not be young anymore. For another, the senior nuns still feel productive and would rather stay with the congregation for the rest of their lives, competently carrying on the mission of the RGS as long as they can. Sr. Mary notes that their productivity is what perhaps animates them, or the knowledge that they are living up to the RGS vow of zeal. In any case, these nuns are not referred to in the language of burden and decline.

They have not been relegated to second-hand participation in the over-all administration of the congregation.

Inevitably, though, the physical and biological manifestations of advanced age catches up with the older nuns. It now becomes the responsibility of the younger ones to take care of them, keep them company and witness their deterioration and death. Sr. Mary does not want this to happen to herself. Though she thinks the younger nuns don't mind taking care of the older ones, she doesn't want to be a burden to them when the time comes. She has observed the dependency of the older people who are resi-



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dents in the RGS' Home for the Aged. Here and amongst the senior nuns, Sr. Mary has caught a glimpse her own future, and she feels threatened by it. Despite her positive experience within the community, she seems unable to reject the negative stereotype associated with aging.

Sr. Mary clearly speaks from the other end of the young-old duality. She is still in a position to enjoy the positive connotation of being young and productive. But the logic of associating old age with burden and dependency, which she herself has witnessed, has proved to be persuasive. If she can avoid it, she would not like to see herself getting old to the point of having to be washed and fed by a younger woman. It has not occurred to her, though, that as a baby, her mother or another older person washed and fed her. Indeed, caring for the very young is universal. But then, there is no question that babies and children need to be cared for and prepared to become productive and useful members of society. Why cannot the same care be seen in the same light with regard to older members of our society?

It has been said that the social construction of age exerts a more far-reaching influ-

ence than its chronological and biological aspects. It goes without saying that nobody can avoid becoming one's chronological age. Biological aging, with its accompanying physiological changes, is also inevitable even if it is medicalised as ill health and physical decline. It is the *cultural* meanings attached to aging and its bodily expression that make age a less-than-certain identifier. Sr. Mary's community has evidently re-drawn the coercive boundaries of the young-old duality. But why does the younger nun still think that growing old means becoming dependent and a burden to others? The possibility exists, of course, that this will in fact happen.

In many societies today, growing old is enforced and institutionalised. People are pressured to retire earlier and to live in homes for the aged. Upon reaching the age of 60, they are labelled as "old," for whom last year, 1999, was declared the year of the elderly.

Positive old-age stereotypes such as recognition of their past contributions and the wisdom they have gained, their memories as repository of history, obscure the reason why older people are "demoted" to volunteer work, mentoring or grandparenting roles. The stereotypes also mask the ways in which the older people themselves contest how their old age has been determined for them. ↷

\*The main informant of this article has requested not to be identified.

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