

CARING FOR THE CAREGIVERS: ASSISTING RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THEIR ELDER YEARS

For decades, they have been the silent sentinels of care—ministering to the frail, comforting the sick, and guiding the aging with gentle hands and steadfast hearts. **The Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm**, like many other religious communities devoted to elder care, have dedicated their lives to ensuring that the elderly are treated with dignity and compassion.

But what happens when the caregivers themselves begin to age? Who ensures that these devoted women receive the same care they have so selflessly provided to others?

THE AGING CHALLENGE AMONG RELIGIOUS SISTERS

This is a growing challenge within religious communities. Many Sisters, after years of dedicated service, do not have access to the financial resources or structured support they require in their later years. Unlike the institutions they have served, which receive funding through various channels, religious sisters often live on minimal stipends with limited retirement resources. Yet, their need for specialized geriatric care—dementia support, palliative care, and chronic disease management—is just as urgent as that of the people they have spent their lives caring for.

Caring for elder Sisters presents unique challenges—not only due to their physical needs but also because of the deeply ingrained way they have lived their lives. Unlike the general aging population, religious sisters have spent decades adhering to a life of devotion, discipline, and sacrifice. Their daily routines, manner of dress, modes of communication, and personal restrictions are not just lifestyle but



Trish Gathers and Sister Peter DiMaria (Sammie Orih)

reflections of their lifelong commitment to faith.

These factors make traditional elder care approaches difficult to implement. Many aging sisters are accustomed to a life of humility and self-denial, making it hard for them to express personal needs or accept assistance. Their sense of duty and service often persists well into old age, sometimes leading them to neglect their own health. Additionally, the communal lifestyle they have embraced for decades means they are more comfortable receiving care from those who understand their way of life—fellow Sisters who share their values and experiences.

SISTER PETER LILLIAN'S MISSION: EDUCATING FOR THE FUTURE

Sister M. Peter Lillian Di Maria, O.Carm., has spent over 40 years at the forefront of elder care ministry, pioneering dementia care programs and palliative care education. As the Director of the Avila Institute of Gerontology (AIG), she has made it her life's work to educate caregivers, religious communities, and healthcare professionals on how to provide compassionate and informed care. Now, she is turning her focus outward to religious congregations worldwide.

Her vision is clear: to ensure that aging Sisters, who have spent their lives in service, receive the same level of dignity and care that they have always provided to others. And that begins with education.

"Giving Sisters the opportunity to

learn current concepts on elder issues is key to caring for one another," Sister Peter Lillian explains. "We have to empower religious communities—locally and globally—to understand the challenges of aging and to provide the right kind of support."

This initiative is not just about training nurses or caregivers; it is about creating a sustainable, faith-based model of elder care within religious communities. It is about teaching Sisters how to recognize the signs of dementia among their own, how to manage chronic illnesses, and how to provide spiritual and emotional support as they navigate the realities of aging together.

A CALL TO ACTION: CARING FOR THOSE WHO HAVE CARED FOR OTHERS

Religious congregations worldwide are facing similar challenges. As the number of young women entering religious life declines and the majority of sisters grow older, the need for structured elder care within convents and communities has never been greater. Without proper funding, training, and resources, these devoted caregivers risk falling into neglect—the very situation they have spent their lives preventing for others.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: SUPPORTING THE EDUCATION AND CARE OF AGING SISTERS

Sister Peter Lillian and the Avila Institute of Gerontology are leading the way, but they cannot do it alone. Raising awareness about the aging crisis among religious Sisters is just the first

step. To truly make an impact, funding is needed to:

- Expand educational programs that train Sisters in elder care
- Develop new resources on dementia care and aging-related illnesses
- Provide assessments and advisory services to aging religious congregations worldwide
- Build sustainable support systems for retired and elder Sisters

It is time to give back to the women who have given so much. Supporting this initiative is not just about providing care—it is about upholding the mission of kindness, dignity, and compassion that these sisters have lived by.

As **Sister Peter Lillian** often reminds us, the words of **Venerable Mary Angeline Teresa, O.Carm.** still ring true:

"Be Kinder Than Kindness Itself."

Now, more than ever, it is time to extend that kindness to the sisters who have spent a lifetime in service.

JOIN US IN GIVING BACK

Every contribution, no matter the size, helps ensure that aging sisters receive the dignity, care, and respect they deserve.

If you or your organization would like to donate, sponsor a program, or support this mission in any way, please consider making a gift today.

To donate or learn more about how you can help, please visit the Avila Institute Gerontology's website at <https://avilainstitute.org/>

Or email: info@avilainstitute.org

Let us show our gratitude by ensuring that those who have dedicated their lives to serving others receive the care and compassion they need in their later years.

Together, we can continue their mission of love and kindness for generations to come.

"The difference is Love"™



Sister Diane Mack, Sister Dorothy and Sister Kevin Patricia Lynch (Sammie Orih)

