The article was first reported by The Catholic Free Press

By Tanya Connor

Parishes honored senior citizens in a variety of ways for the first World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly this week. And, it was a natural fit for one popular novena to incorporate the observance into its schedule.

Pope Francis announced this Church-wide celebration last January, and scheduled it to be held annually on the fourth Sunday of July, near the July 26 feast of SS. Joachim and Anne, parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

“I am with you always” (Mt 28:20), the theme Pope Francis chose for the inaugural commemoration of the new observance, was this year’s theme for the Novena to St. Anne at St. Anne Shrine in Sturbridge, a novena flier said.

One reason Pope Francis instituted this World Day was to show that grandparents and the elderly will not be left alone, despite today’s throw-away culture where they are often the first to be discarded, said Assumptionist Father Alex Castro, opening the novena July 18. Director of the shrine and pastor of St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish, where the shrine is located, he spoke about the older generation’s vocation to pass on the faith.

“As parents and grandparents, we oftentimes feel that what our kids need most from us is clear answers, clear direction, and a set of rules and guidelines to follow,” parish youth minister Joseph Krans said in a talk at the youth Mass July 23. “Although sometimes necessary, this is not what they need most from us,” he said. They need to experience Christ’s love in and through us.

“You have so much to offer them … Your true and authentic self,” Mr. Krans told listeners. Youth need to know “we too experience fear, anxiety, emptiness, pain … questioning” and that

God “accompanies us on our journey.”

Closing the novena on the July 26 feast day, Father Dennis Gallagher, provincial of the North American Province of the Augustinians of the Assumption, said that what Pope Francis did in calling for this observance “will help to restore our humanity and rebalance our life.” When one segment of the human family is diminished, the whole human family is, Father Gallagher said.

He said he thinks one present-day idol is “thinking of ourselves as autonomous individuals” with no need for dependence on others or even gratitude. Then the elderly and grandparents get marginalized and are considered dispensable.

But, Father Gallagher said, he’s seen that grandparents help college students understand that they belong to something greater than themselves – an extended family. Students feel unconditional love and acceptance from their grandparents and that helps them accept themselves. They see that their grandparents – and God – are on their side. Grandparents show that “being is more important than having or accomplishing;” being there for others is important.

Father Gallagher prayed a blessing over the grandparents, as did priests at some other parishes.

Relic at Sacred Heart

At Masses at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Webster last weekend, Father Adam Reid, pastor, had grandparents and other senior citizens stand for a blessing and gave special credit to Jesus’ grandmother.

He invited everyone to venerate the parish’s relic of St. Anne, to acknowledge her presence and pray that “she will advocate for us” with the Light of the World Renewal Program, which Sacred Heart is to start this fall. St. Anne will be patroness of that effort, he announced.

Relics underscore the fact that saints are close to us and that their intercession is powerful, Father Reid said. He noted that the former parish school, St. Anne Elementary, was staffed by the Sisters of St. Anne, and that a group called the Ladies of St. Anne used to help the school and parish.

Closing the school's bank accounts when it was to be merged with St. Louis Elementary to form All Saints Academy, "we had nothing left," Father Reid said. They were $70,000 short and teachers needed to be paid. He said he pleaded for St. Anne's help and received it. The money "arrived" from a single donor.

Prayers and novena

St. Anne was also honored at St. Ann Parish in North Oxford. A parishioner "set up a display in the church, using a St. Anne statue," said Father Michael N. Lavallee, pastor. "She used flowers from her garden to decorate it. … She wanted to do it for the feast of St. Anne."

Last weekend Father Lavallee's homilies included information about St. Anne and St Joachim from the "Protoevangelium of James," a non-canonical document about their lives and the early life of Mary, he said. "Protoevangelium" means "before the Gospel," he explained.

"At the conclusion of the Mass I led the congregation in a prayer to St. Anne and had a blessing of all the grandparents present," Father Lavallee said.

On the feast day his homily focused on "one of the virtues of St. Anne, which is her love of prayer," he said. "That is represented in the traditional image of St. Anne with her hand pointing upwards toward the sky and her teaching her daughter, Mary, to pray."

At another parish named for the mother of Mary, St. Anne Parish in Southborough, people prayed a novena to St. Anne after Masses for nine days, said Dan Doyle, religious education director.

Father Carlos Ruiz, pastor of St. Anna Parish in Leominster, said he offered special prayers for grandparents at Masses last weekend and on the feast day. A bigger celebration is planned for the fall, when the parish's school, St. Anna Elementary, invites grandparents to attend a Mass and breakfast.