
Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities

United States Catholic Conference

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The same Jesus who heard the cry for recognition from the disabled of Judea and Samaria two thousand years ago calls us, his followers, to embrace our responsibility to our own disabled brothers and sisters in the United States. The Catholic Church pursues its mission by furthering the spiritual, intellectual, moral, and physical development of the people it serves. As pastors of the Church in America, we are committed to working for a deeper understanding of both the pain and the potential of our neighbors who are blind, deaf, mentally retarded, emotionally impaired, who have special learning problems, or who suffer from single or multiple physical disabilities—all those whom disability may set apart. We call upon people of good will to reexamine their attitudes toward their disabled brothers and sisters and promote their well-being, acting with the sense of justice and the compassion that the Lord so clearly desires. Further, realizing the unique gifts disabled individuals have to offer the Church, we wish to address the need for their fuller integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life.

Prejudice starts with the simple perception of difference, whether that difference is physical or psychological. Down through the ages, people have tended to interpret these differences in crude moral terms. “Our” group is not just different from “theirs”; it is better in some vague but compelling way. Few of us would admit to being prejudiced against persons with disabilities. We bear these people no ill will and do not knowingly seek to abrogate their rights. Yet disabled individuals are visibly, sometimes bluntly different from the “norm,” and we react to this difference. Even if we do not look down upon persons with disabilities, we tend all too often to think of them as somehow apart—not completely “one of us.”

What disabled individuals need, first of all, is acceptance in this difference that can neither be denied nor overlooked. No acts of charity or justice can be of lasting value to persons with disabilities unless they are informed by a sincere understanding love that penetrates the wall of strangeness and affirms the common humanity underlying all distinction. Scripture teaches us that “any other commandment there may be [is] all summed up in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Rom 13:9). In his wisdom, Jesus said, “as yourself.” We must love others from the inside out, so to speak, accepting their difference from us in the same way that we accept our difference from them.

The Church's Response to the Person with Disabilities

Concern for persons with disabilities was one of the prominent notes of Jesus' earthly ministry. When asked by John's disciples: "Are you 'He who is to come' or do we look for another?" Jesus responded with words recalling the prophecies of Isaiah: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see; the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Mt 11:3-5). Persons with disabilities become witnesses for Christ, his healing of their bodies a sign of the spiritual healing he brought to all people.

Which is less trouble to say, "Your sins are forgiven" or "Stand up and walk"? To help you realize that the Son has authority on earth to forgive sins—He then said to the paralyzed man—"Stand up! Roll up your mat, and go home" (Mt 9:5f).

The Church that Jesus founded would surely have been derelict had it failed to respond to his example in its attention to persons with disabilities. It remains faithful to its mission when its members become more and more people of the beatitudes, a people blessed in their meekness, their suffering, their thirst for righteousness. We all struggle with life. We must carry on this struggle in a spirit of mutual love, inspired by Christ's teaching that in serving others we serve the Lord himself (cf. Mt 25:40). In doing so, we build a community of interdependent people and discover the kingdom of God in our midst.

The Church, through the response of its members to the needs of their neighbors, and through its parishes, health care institutions, and social service agencies, has always attempted to show a pastoral concern for disabled individuals. However, in a spirit of humble candor, we must acknowledge that at times we have responded to the needs of some of our disabled people only after circumstances or public opinion have compelled us to do so. By every means possible, therefore, the Church must continue to expand its healing ministry to these persons, helping them when necessary, working with them, and raising its voice with them and with all members of society who are their advocates. Jesus revealed by his actions that service to and with people in need is a privilege and an opportunity as well as a duty. When we extend our healing hands to others, we are healed ourselves. On the most basic level, the Church responds to persons with disabilities by defending their rights. Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* stresses the innate dignity of all men and women:

In an ordered and productive community, it is a fundamental principle that every human being is a "person." . . . [One] has rights and duties . . . flowing directly and spontaneously from [one's] very nature. These rights are therefore universal, inviolable and inalienable (no. 9).

The word *inalienable* reminds us that the principles on which our democracy is founded also guarantee certain rights to all Americans, regardless of their circumstances. The first of these, of course, is the right to life. We have spoken out on this issue on many occasions. We see defense of the right to life of persons with disabilities as a matter of particular urgency, however, because the presence of disabling conditions is not infrequently used as a rationale for abortion. Moreover, those severely disabled babies who are permitted to be born are sometimes denied ordinary and usual medical procedures.

All too often, abortion and postnatal neglect are promoted by arguing that the disabled infant will survive only to suffer a life of pain and deprivation. We find this reasoning appalling. Society's frequent indifference to the plight of citizens with disabilities is a problem that cries aloud for solutions based on justice and conscience, not violence. All people have a clear duty to do what lies in their power to improve living conditions for persons with disabilities, rather than ignoring them or attempting to eliminate them as a burden not worth dealing with.

Defense of the right to life, then, implies the defense of other rights that enable the disabled individual to achieve the fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable. These include the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities, and services. Those who must be institutionalized deserve decent, personalized care and human support as well as the pastoral services of the Christian community. Institutionalization will gradually become less necessary for some as the Christian community increases its awareness of persons with disabilities and builds a stronger and more integrated support system for them.

It is not enough merely to affirm the rights of persons with disabilities. We must actively work to realize these rights in the fabric of modern society. Recognizing that persons with disabilities have a claim to our respect because they are persons, because they share in the one redemption of Christ, and because they contribute to our society by their activity within it, the Church must become an advocate for and with them. It must work to increase the public's sensitivity toward the needs of persons with disabilities and support their rightful demand for justice. Moreover, individuals and organizations at every level within the Church should minister to persons with disabilities by

servicing their personal and social needs. Many persons with disabilities can function on their own as well as anyone in society. For others, aid would be welcome. All of us can visit the homebound, offer transportation to those who cannot drive, read to those who cannot read, speak out for those who have difficulty pleading their own case. In touching the lives of disabled men, women, and children in this way, we come closest to imitating Jesus' own example, which should be always before our eyes (cf. Lk 4:17-19, 21).

The Person with Disabilities and the Ecclesial Community

Just as the Church must do all in its power to help ensure persons with disabilities a secure place in the human community, so it must reach out to welcome gratefully those who seek to participate in the ecclesial community. The central meaning of Jesus' ministry is bound up with the fact that he sought the company of people who, for one reason or another, were forced to live on the fringe of society (cf. Mk 7:37). These he made the special object of his attention, declaring that the last would be first and that the humble would be exalted in his Father's kingdom (cf. Mt 20:16; 23:12). The Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with these "marginal" people, including those who suffer from physical and psychological disabilities.

If persons with disabilities are to become equal partners in the Christian community, injustices must be eliminated and ignorance and apathy replaced by increased sensitivity and warm acceptance. The leaders and the general membership of the Church must educate themselves to appreciate fully the contribution persons with disabilities can make to the Church's spiritual life. Disabled individuals bring with them a special insight into the meaning of life, for they live—more than the rest of us, perhaps—in the shadow of the cross. And out of their experience they forge virtues such as courage, patience, perseverance, compassion, and sensitivity that should serve as an inspiration to all Christians.

In the case of many persons with disabilities, integration into the Christian community may require nothing more than issuing an invitation and pursuing it. For some others, however, full participation can only come about if the Church exerts itself to devise innovative programs and techniques. At the very least, we must undertake forms of evangelization that speak to the particular needs of persons with disabilities, make those liturgical adaptations that promote their active participation, and provide help and services that reflect our loving concern for those with serious problems.

This concern should be extended also to families, and especially the parents, of persons with disabilities. No family is ever really prepared for the

birth of a disabled child. When such a child does come into the world, families often need strong support from their faith community. That support must remain firm with the passage of the years. The path to independence for persons with disabilities can be difficult. Family members need to know that others stand with them—at least in spirit—as they help their children along this path.

The central importance of family members in the lives of all persons with disabilities, regardless of age, must never be underestimated. They lovingly foster the spiritual, mental, and physical development of the disabled person and are the primary teachers of religion and morality. Ministers working in the apostolate for the disabled should treat them as a uniquely valuable resource for understanding the various needs of those they serve.

Full participation in the Christian community has another important aspect that must not be overlooked. When we think of persons with disabilities in relation to ministry, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us. As noted above, persons with disabilities can, by their example, teach the able-bodied much about strength and Christian acceptance. Moreover, they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord's work in the world, according to their God-given talents and capacities. Because persons with disabilities may not be fully aware of the contribution they can make, church leaders should consult with them, offering suggestions on practical ways of serving.

Parish Level

For most Catholics, the community of believers is embodied in the local parish. The parish is the door to participation for persons with disabilities, and it is the responsibility of the pastor and lay leaders to make sure that this door is always open. We noted above that the task, on occasion, may not be an easy one; involving some persons with disabilities in parish life may challenge the ingenuity and commitment of the entire congregation. Yet, in order to be loyal to its calling, to be truly pastoral, the parish must make sure that it does not exclude any Catholic who wishes to take part in its activities.

If the participation of persons with disabilities and their families is to be real and meaningful, the parish must prepare itself to receive them. This preparation might begin with a census aimed at identifying parishioners and those with no church affiliation who have significant disabilities. Parish leaders could then work with individuals and their families to determine what steps, if any, are needed to facilitate their participation in parish life.

It may be necessary at this stage to place considerable emphasis upon educating the members of the parish community on the rights and needs of

local disabled individuals. All too often, one hears that there are too few persons with disabilities in a given parish to warrant ramped entrances, special liturgies, or education programs. Some say that these matters should be handled on the diocesan level. Although many parishes have severely limited resources, we encourage all to make the best effort their circumstances permit. No parishioner should be excluded on the basis of disability alone.

The most obvious obstacle to participation in parish activities faced by many persons with disabilities is the physical design of parish buildings. Structurally inaccessible buildings are at once a sign and a guarantee of their isolation from the community. Sometimes all that is required to remedy the situation is the installation of outside ramps and railings, increased lighting, minor modification of toilet facilities, and, perhaps, the removal of a few pews and kneelers. In other cases, major alterations and redesign of equipment may be called for. Each parish must examine its own situation to determine the feasibility of such alterations. Mere cost must never be the exclusive consideration, however, since the provision of free access to religious functions for all interested people is a clear pastoral duty.

Whenever parishes contemplate new construction, they should make provision for the needs of the disabled in their plans. If both new construction and the adaptation of present buildings are out of the question, the parish should devise other ways to reach its disabled members. In cooperation with them, parish leaders may locate substitute facilities, for example, or make a concerted effort to serve at home those who cannot come to church.

It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the life of the Church, even by passive omission, is to deny the reality of that community. Accessibility involves far more than physical alterations to parish buildings. Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the eucharist and other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments of reconciliation, confirmation, and anointing of the sick. The experiences and needs of persons with disabilities vary, as do those of any group of people. For some with significant disabilities, special liturgies may be appropriate. Others will not require such liturgies, but will benefit if certain equipment and services are made available to them. Celebrating liturgies simultaneously in sign language enables the deaf person to enter more deeply into their spirit and meaning. Participation aids, such as Mass books and hymnals in large print or Braille, serve the same purpose for blind or partially sighted members.

Persons with disabilities can also play a more active role in the liturgy if provided with proper aids and training. Blind parishioners can serve as rectors,

for example, and deaf parishioners as special ministers of the eucharist. We look forward to the day when more persons with disabilities are active in the full-time, professional service of the Church, and we applaud recent decisions to accept qualified candidates for ordination or the religious life in spite of their significant disabilities.

Evangelization and catechesis for persons with disabilities must be geared in content and method to their particular situation. Specialized catechists should help them interpret the meaning of their lives and should give witness to Christ's presence in the local community in ways they can understand and appreciate. We hasten to add, however, that great care should be taken to avoid further isolation of persons with disabilities through these programs which, as far as possible, should be integrated with the normal catechetical activities of the parish. We have provided guidelines for the instruction of persons with disabilities and for their participation in the liturgical life of the Church in *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*.

Finally, parishes must be sensitive to the social needs of members with disabilities. We have already touched on some ways in which Christians can express their concern for their disabled brothers and sisters. These actions and others like them can help solve some of the disabled individual's practical problems. They also create an opportunity for the disabled and the able-bodied to join hands and break down the barriers that separate them. In such an interchange, it is often the person with disabilities who gives the gift of most value.

Diocesan Level

Efforts to bring persons with disabilities into the parish community are more likely to be effective if the parishes are supported by offices operating at the diocesan level. At present, the social service needs of disabled individuals and their families are usually addressed by established diocesan agencies. The adequacy of this ministry should be reevaluated in the light of present-day concerns and resources. Where it is found to be inadequate, the program should be strengthened to assure that specialized aid is provided to persons with disabilities. In those cases where there is no program at all, we urge that one be established.

The clergy, religious, and laity engaged in this program should help the parish by developing policy and translating it into practical strategies for working with persons with disabilities. They should serve as advocates for disabled individuals seeking help from other agencies. Finally, they should monitor public policy and generate multifaceted educational opportunities for those who minister to and with persons with disabilities.

Many opportunities for action at the diocesan level now exist with regard to public policy. Three pieces of federal legislation that promise significant benefits to disabled individuals have been passed within the past few years; each calls for study and possible support. We refer to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Rehabilitation Amendments of 1974, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Enforcement of the regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which forbids discrimination on the basis of disabling conditions, is a matter of particular interest. In response to the Rehabilitation Amendments, the executive branch of the federal government has also taken recent action, sponsoring a White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals in 1977. This conference was attended by official state delegations, and there would be value in determining which of its recommendations are being applied in the state or states where a given diocese is located. Diocesan offices will also wish to keep abreast of general public policy and practice in their states.

Dioceses might make their most valuable contribution in the area of education. They should encourage and support training for all clergy, religious, seminarians, and lay ministers, focusing special attention on those actually serving persons with disabilities, whether in parishes or some other setting. Religious education personnel could profit from guidance in adapting their curricula to the needs of disabled learners, and Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers could be provided in-service training in how best to integrate disabled students into programs of regular education. The diocesan office might also offer institutes for diocesan administrators who direct programs with an impact on persons with disabilities.

The coordination of educational services within the dioceses should supplement the provision of direct educational aids. It is important to establish liaisons between facilities for persons with disabilities operating under Catholic auspices (e.g., special, residential, and day schools; psychological services; and the like), and usual Catholic school programs. Only in this way can the structural basis be laid for the integration, where feasible, of students with disabilities into programs for the able-bodied. Moreover, in order to ensure persons with disabilities the widest possible range of educational opportunities, Catholic facilities should be encouraged to develop working relationships both among themselves and with private and public agencies serving the same population.

National Level

As the most visible expression of our commitment, we, the bishops, now designate ministry to persons with disabilities as a special focus for the

National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference. This represents a mandate to each office and secretariat, as it develops its plans and programs, to address the concerns of persons with disabilities. Appropriate offices should also serve as resource and referral centers to both parochial and diocesan bodies in matters relating to the needs of our disabled brothers and sisters.

Concluding Remarks

Persons with disabilities are not looking for pity. They seek to serve the community and to enjoy their full baptismal rights as members of the Church. Our interaction with them can and should be an affirmation of our faith. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities. We are one flock that follows a single shepherd.

Our wholeness as individuals and as the people of God lies in openness, service, and love. The bishops of the United States feel a concern for persons with disabilities that goes beyond their spiritual welfare to encompass their total well-being. This concern should find expression at all levels. Parishes should maintain their own programs of ministry to persons with disabilities, and dioceses should make every effort to establish offices that coordinate this ministry and support parish efforts. Finally, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference will be more vigilant in promoting ministry to persons with disabilities throughout the structure of the Church. We look to the future with what we feel is a realistic optimism. The Church has a tradition of ministry to persons with disabilities, and this tradition will fuel the stronger, more broadly based efforts called for by contemporary circumstances. We also have faith that our quest for justice, increasingly enlisted on the side of persons with disabilities, will work powerfully in their behalf. No one would deny that every man, woman, and child has the right to develop his or her potential to the fullest. With God's help and our own determination, the day will come when that right is realized in the lives of all persons with disabilities.

Also Available

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities

Seeks to improve access to the sacraments by persons with disabilities and to reduce inconsistencies in pastoral practice. Recognizes the call for adequate evangelization, catechetical formation and sacramental preparation programs that enable disabled persons to prepare for and receive the sacraments. From the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pastoral Practices.

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