

VI. PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth . His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be born blind?” Neither” answered Jesus: “It was no sin, either of this man or of his parents. Rather it was to let God’s works show forth in him.” (John 9:1-3)

Jesus was fully inclusive whenever he dealt with people. In the gospels, he frequently paused along his way to deal directly and sensitively with the person in front of him. Quite often that person had a physical or mental disability – a need for healing. Not only did he meet and heal the man born blind, but those possessed by demons, the woman who was bent over, and many others persons with disabilities were recipients of Jesus’ compassion and care. Consistently, Jesus treated these least ones as full human persons, worthy of dignity and love. As a community of faith, we are called to do no less.

The same Jesus who heard the cry for recognition from the people with disabilities 2000 years ago calls us, his followers, to embrace our responsibility to those with special needs. (*U.S. Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities*, 1)

We are called to invite all people to become closer to God. Jesus never turned away anyone who wanted to come to him. Rather, against the usual cultural norms, he sought out those whom society rejected and treated them more humanely than they were treated by most other people of his time.

A recognition and commitment to human dignity is part of the essential outlook and lifestyle that makes us Catholics. It calls us to look at persons of all ages and with all types of special needs not with the eyes of human beings, but with the compassionate eyes of God. Indeed, canon 213 asserts the dignity of *all* Catholics in the sight of God and their right to full participation in the life of the Church. The United States Catholic Bishops further point out

In accord with canon 777, no. 4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities. Persons with disabilities, their advocates and their families, as well as those knowledgeable in serving disabled persons, can make a most valuable contribution to these programs. Parish catechetical and sacramental programs may need to be adapted for some parishioners with disabilities. Further, parishes should encourage persons with disabilities to participate in all levels of pastoral ministry (e.g., as ministers, catechists, etc.) *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (5)

Adaptation of parish catechetical programs to serve persons with special needs makes clear that these persons are just as important as any other. By making them feel welcome and accepted for their unique giftedness, we imitate in our programs the mercy of God and compassionate acceptance, which communicates to the parish community at large the value of welcoming everyone as Jesus did. When working with persons with special needs, we need to view the person as possessing certain gifts, focus on helping the person

discern his/her gifts, and encourage them and help them find opportunities to use these gifts for the good of the community.

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 them for their difference from us in the same way that we accept our difference from them. (*US Catholic Bishop’s 1988 Resolution on the Tenth Anniversary of the Pastoral Statement on Persons With Disabilities*)

The Bishops noted that parish pastoral staffs are called to proclaim an attitude of joyful inclusion in the life of the parish by developing programs to help people of the parish become more open to those with disabilities:

The creation of a fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical accommodation to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners towards persons with disabilities. Pastoral ministers are encouraged to develop specific programs aimed at forming a community of believers known for its joyful inclusion of all God’s people around the table of the Lord. *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (6)

It is important to include persons with disabilities in the full catechetical and sacramental life of the parish community, and to make them feel valued, accepted for their unique gifts and truly welcomed by the community. Not only do such persons of any age or condition have the right to fully accessible catechesis, to sacrament preparation, and to share in the role of catechist, but above all, they have the right to a community that truly welcomes them with love and understanding, like Christ, who accepted those who came to him with special needs with open arms, as our primary model.