

IV. SPECIAL NEEDS

Catechesis for persons with special needs requires sensitivity, compassion and a clear understanding of the gospel imperative to favor the least ones among us. Catechetical leaders can do this by recognizing first of all that such persons want above all to be accepted and valued for who they are.

A. PROGRAMMING

All persons with special needs have a right to be fully welcomed into their parish catechetical, sacramental and youth ministry programs and should not be denied access because of their disability. Evangelization and catechesis for individuals with disabilities must be customized in content and method to the particular situation of the individual.

However, great care should be taken to avoid further isolation of these persons through fragmentation of programs or through attitudes. As far as is possible, these persons should be integrated into the normal catechetical activities of the parish. A student should be placed in the most inclusive instructional process possible. In spite of his or her disability, a person with special needs has the same right to participate in the full life of the faith community and in its sacraments as any other baptized person. Catechetical leaders should be very aware when dealing with such persons and their families to avoid giving the impression that these persons are a cause of inconvenience.

In the event it is necessary for children or youth to receive formation in a segregated setting, they should be included in any special events of their parish community, such as liturgies, social and recreational activities, so that they receive the support of their own community of faith.

B. PLACEMENT OPTIONS

Placement options in formation programs for students with special needs are to be considered in the following order:

1. inclusion in a typical classroom with no additional supports or accommodations
2. integration in a typical classroom with appropriate supports and accommodations
3. part-time instruction in a typical classroom and part time in a segregated setting
4. full time in a segregated setting in a small group
5. full time individualized instruction
6. the parent or guardian as instructor, with the understanding that he or she will use approved curriculum materials and will meet periodically with the catechetical leader

In cases where parishes do not have enough students or resources to warrant their own special needs program, an agreement may be worked out with another nearby parish. Students may receive formation there with the understanding that the home parish will provide teachers' aides or other assistance. It is important that the catechetical leaders of both parishes work together to coordinate an approach tailored to the needs of the both the student and family.

C. MINISTER FORMATION

Coordinators and catechists for special needs programs or individualized instruction (including parents) must be practicing Catholics and go through the same diocesan initial catechist certification and ongoing formation as catechists in the regular religious education program. (See II, A, 2, "Basic Requirements for Catechists"). This is true even if they have training or background in special education for public school classroom teaching. A non-Catholic specialist who assists those with a particular disability may serve as an aide or "interpreter" in the presence of a qualified Catholic catechist.

D. SACRAMENT PREPARATION

Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full members of a parish community. Before and especially after Baptism, parishes should have a definite plan for providing a welcoming environment for them and their families.

1. Parishes should provide opportunities for persons who have not been fully initiated to participate in sacrament preparation according to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults/Children, with adaptations made for the needs and abilities of the individuals involved.
2. Persons with disabilities should receive the sacraments in their own parish communities and with their appropriate peers, even if they are receiving preparation at another cooperating parish.
3. Parents or guardians of disabled infants should participate fully in the parish baptismal preparation and formation, with special attention given to the pastoral needs of the entire family.
4. If the person to be baptized is of catechetical age, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults may be adapted according to need.
5. "Readiness" of such persons, especially for First Eucharist, may differ from other persons. Pastors are not to refuse the sacraments to persons with special needs if they are suitably disposed (Canon 776). In the case of a person who cannot communicate well, parents or another advocate can ask on behalf of the individual. Readiness is discerned when the person has been prepared up to his or her full potential, although the ability to indicate understanding may vary, depending on the disability.

- a. **Eucharist:** The criteria for reception of the Eucharist is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for others, namely that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally. Pastors and catechetical leaders are encouraged to consult with parents, guardians, diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, and other experts when making these judgements.

A student with a profound disability does not necessarily need to be on the same time frame to receive the Eucharist as other students in the program. With input from the catechist working with the student, the DRE, in consultation with the parents and any other advocates for the child will make the judgement about when the student is ready. The DRE should then consult with the pastor, and the decision is to be a result of this consultation. If it is determined that a person who is disabled is not ready to receive the sacrament, great care should be taken in explaining the reasons for such a decision. However, in cases of doubt, the rights of the baptized to receive the sacraments are to be honored.

- b. **Confirmation:** Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason, are to be encouraged either directly, or if necessary, through their parents or guardians, to receive the sacrament of Confirmation at the appropriate time.
- c. **Reconciliation:** If a person with mental or developmental disabilities is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed a sin, even though he or she may not be able to describe the sin precisely in words, that person may receive the sacrament of Reconciliation. Those with profound mental disabilities, who cannot experience even minimal contrition, may be invited to participate in penitential services with the rest of the community to the extent of their ability. In such cases, the priest may choose either to give sacramental absolution or a blessing.

It is the responsibility of the pastor and catechetical leader to provide evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacrament preparation for parishioners with disabilities (Canon 777.4). However, persons with disabilities, their families and advocates, as well as those knowledgeable in serving disabled persons may serve as catechists or aides for preparation of those with special needs.

If the participation of persons with disabilities is to be real and meaningful, the parish must prepare itself to receive them by creating a warm and welcoming environment. A parish should appreciate fully the contributions persons with special needs can make to the church's spiritual life, both by what they can contribute and by the witness of their very presence within the community. Because persons with special needs may not be fully aware of the contribution they can make, church leaders should offer them practical ways of serving, in such roles as catechetical, liturgical and service ministries, with suitable adaptation of the physical environment as needed.