

The Role of the Handicapped in Our Lives

By Father William Frankhauser, SJ

More and more people are becoming aware that the handicapped have a real place in society and more precisely, that every person has a role to play in human history and in the future of the world.

Those of us who work with the handicapped constantly ask ourselves the question "What is a handicapped person?" Is such a person a complete human being or not? What is his place in society? Too often these questions are not asked explicitly enough. But now, I think, it's time that we consider them seriously; for our attitude to the handicapped must depend upon how we answer.

First of all, this is a very old problem. Plato, and even Aristotle, with all of their humanism, affirm that the weak should be killed at an early age. For them, if a man is not able to fulfill himself through the use of reason, or to work effectively, there is no reason for him to live. Time, energy, and money should not be wasted on the care of outcasts. As in the world of art, for each masterpiece there are some failures and these should be eliminated, according to that view.

The other side of this narrow view of man, where absolute primacy is given to reason, is another concept, that of more spiritually-oriented cultures.

Some who are handicapped in these societies are considered to be religious, to be more in touch with the spiritual. In Greek mythology, madmen were often thought of as prophets. They spoke a strange language. They were, in a way, intermediaries between man and the gods. In our day, these exceptional characteristics of madness and a maladjustment have been shown in the films of Fellini, in drug addiction, LSD, and in some forms of art, is there not sometimes a feeling for the superiority of madness over reason?

Now between these two extremes, there is what we may call the Western humanist attitude. The handicapped are neither to be despised nor are they thought of as being nearer to the gods. The handicapped are indeed human beings but incomplete, deficient, weak, infirm. We, the "normal," the non-deficient, have no right to get rid of them. Even if we

do not reject them physically, we unfortunately do not hesitate to do so spiritually and psychologically, treating them rather as objects than as persons. They are "poor things" who must be helped and protected, children who will remain so all their lives. They must be given suitable living conditions and, most important, we must find occupations for them because they can be useful.

How can we look upon the handicapped then? Failures to be eliminated? Blessed by God? Paternally with condescension as inferior beings who must be helped? I would like to suggest an attitude which has the advantage of assimilating what is true and obvious in those approaches already mentioned and which takes account of the attractive qualities which make some handicapped people so appealing.

I would like to speak specifically about the mentally handicapped, those who have a weakness of the self, the rational and willful self. This rational self is necessary so we may be active in society, capable of organizing our lives and those of others. But man is not just a social being who has to struggle to further his place in society and defend himself, he also loves and wants to be loved, to communicate and to share. To be active in society, it is imperative to have a strong and integrated self. But the qualities needed to communicate are not the same. To be admired and to be loved are quite different things. We spontaneously love a child, who is happy, pure, simple, laughing. Is it not his youth, his weakness, his innocence and purity which make us love him?

The handicapped, by his very being, is a challenge. His weakness, his openness, his simplicity, his confidence, providing he is placed in conditions that are happy and human, call forth goodness from those who hold power and wealth.

For those who are still able to be receptive, contact with the handicapped is often a revelation.

The handicapped have a strange ability to attract. One cannot be unmoved by their simplicity unless one is extraordinarily hardened. The handicapped can, in this way, form a breach in the walls which we men of the 20th Century have built around ourselves through

fear of others. By his very being, the handicapped can inspire feelings, not of pity, paternalism, and condescension, but of altruism.

This is how the handicapped can play his part in society and in the evolution of the world. He restores the balance of the virtues of sensibility and love. He forces the society that heeds his appeal to soften the hardness of its technology and administration. If society, governments, leaders and each individual, instead of trying to rival others for power and glory, listen to the appeal of the weak and submit to their appeal, while trying to help them, our world, instead of becoming more and more dislocated and torn asunder, will be on the way to unity and peace.

The handicapped person is not an outcast, a failure; he is a whole person of great importance. Through his weakness, he constitutes a challenge. We who believe in the handicapped know that they have a certain dignity within them and in working together with them, we help make this dignity visible, so that other members of society see their dignity and learn they can accept them.

The handicapped truly teach each one of us the spiritual and supernatural life. They constantly remind us that the value of a human person rests not in his strength but in the love which inspires his activities. These people teach us more about the Gospel and even about human relations than all the great psychological and philosophical concepts. They help us catch a glimpse of what true theology, true philosophy and true psychology should be.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to know these handicapped people when they live in a happy atmosphere where they can develop to their full potential, have experienced the gentleness and confidence expressed by their outstretched hands. They show themselves as they are, providing, of course, that no attempt is made to make them live another life than their own.

In short, the handicapped teach our society a vital lesson about the immense value of qualities of the heart as distinct from those of the mind, and open our minds and eyes mainly at the level of the life of grace and faith.



Seminarian John Gagnier "spells" the catechism lesson to Tom Kepner at the School for the Deaf.

Deaf Students Can Hear God's Word

By PAT PETRASKE

Students at the Rochester School for the Deaf can "hear" the word of God, thanks to the efforts of Father Thomas Erdle, chaplain and coordinator of the apostolate for the deaf, and seminarians from St. Bernard's.

Weekly religion classes were begun in 1951 when Father Erdle was a first-year theology student at St. Bernard's Seminars.

VATICAN RADIO NOTES INVENTOR'S BIRTHDAY

Vatican City (RNS) — April 25 was the 100th anniversary of the birth of Guglielmo Marconi, the Italian inventor of radio.

Vatican Radio commented that it had special reason to celebrate the occasion as "the one radio station in the world personally designed, realized, and supervised by Guglielmo Marconi."

Vatican Radio was inaugurated by Pope Pius XI on Feb. 12, 1931.

In a "presentation" address, Marconi remarked that it was only with "the help of God, who places so many forces of nature at the disposition of mankind, that I was able to prepare this instrument which will give the faithful the world over the consolation of being able to hear the voice of the Holy Father."

assisted by faculty members from the School for the Deaf, work there for a year and a half. Religion classes are also held for Protestant students.

Learning the "language" of the school's Rochester method, which combines speech reading and finger spelling, is the greatest problem facing the seminarians. Most of the CCD teachers have had little contact with the deaf. Others, like seminarian James Gagnier, who wears two hearing aids, and Charlene DeWint, a deaf mother with four deaf children, personally know the problems facing deaf students.

The older form of manual communication known as sign language, the use of gestures to represent words or phrases, is taboo during religion and other classes at the school. Father Erdle explained that the students, in order to learn their own native language, must see it either through finger spelling or on the printed page.

The Rochester School for the Deaf, with approximately 300 students is 50 per cent Catholic. Nearly 75 per cent of the Catholic students attend the CCD classes. Father Erdle believes that this is a higher rate of participation than is found in other local schools.

ICEIT Closes in Auburn

Auburn — Parents of Blessed Trinity School students and school personnel had the opportunity to monitor the State Education Department experimental program project ICEIT (Improving Cost Effectiveness in Instruction Through Technology) recently conducted at Blessed Trinity.

Blessed Trinity was one of five schools in New York State to be a pilot school testing the television managed learning system. The taped instructional program called "Place of Doors" will be available to schools requesting it after final revisions are made.

Observers monitored both the students in the classroom and the materials being presented over TV. Two fourth grades were taught by ICEIT programming for 20 half days. A third class acted as a control group. The ICEIT students were tested once a week, as well as at the end of the program, to evaluate their learning.

The "Place of Doors" deals with subject areas outside the basic skills of reading, writing and math. The series of professionally prepared films developed for instructional TV are on subjects ranging from social studies, science, cultural heritage, consumerism, ecology, health education and humanities.

Ms. Nancy Pline, production supervisor with SED, Division of Research and Educational Communications, explained that the program is one attempt to meet the rising cost in schools by offering instruction in several areas while not letting funding cutbacks hurt the availability of subject variety.

TV lessons prepared by teachers are implemented by script writers and professional media personnel. The ICEIT program format resembles Sesame Street in that short segments consisting of films, cartoons and skits involving regular characters follow in quick succession.

ICEIT is designed as a self contained package with instructional presentations reinforced with built in activities.

Paraprofessionals offer classroom supervision, thus giving teachers more opportunity to concentrate on basic skills and to work with individual children.

ICEIT is funded through state and federal funds. It started in 1970 with a pilot project in Rochester.

Immediate feedback to the research team through video tapes of class participation are evaluated and lessons redesigned based on student response to content and presentation.

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