

Handicapped First Need Acceptance

The same Jesus who heard the cry for recognition from the handicapped of Judea and Samaria two thousand years ago calls us, His followers, to embrace our responsibility to our own handicapped 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 handicaps — all those whom disability may set apart. We call upon people of good will to re-examine their attitudes toward their handicapped 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 handicapped 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 handicapped people. We bear these people no ill will and do not knowingly seek to abrogate their rights. Yet handicapped individuals are visibly, sometimes bluntly different from the "norm," and we react to this difference. Even if we do not look down upon handicapped people, we tend all too often to think of them as somehow apart — not completely "one of us."

What handicapped 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 handicapped people unless they are informed by a sincere and 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 HANDICAPPED PERSON

Concern for handicapped people 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) Handicapped persons 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, 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 handicapped individuals. However, in a spirit of humble candor, we must acknowledge that at times we have responded to the needs of some of our handicapped 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



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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 handicapped individuals 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, inalienable and inalienable."

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 handicapped persons as a matter of particular urgency, however, because the presence of handicapping conditions is not infrequently used as a rationale for abortion. Moreover, those severely handicapped babies who are permitted to be born are sometimes denied ordinary and usual medical procedures.

All too often, abortion and post-natal neglect are promoted by arguing that the handicapped 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 handicapped citizens 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 handicapped people, 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 which enable the handicapped 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 disabled persons and builds a stronger and more integrated support system for them.

It is not enough merely to affirm the rights of handicapped people. We must actively work to realize these rights in the fabric of modern society. Recognizing that handicapped individuals 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 handicapped people and support their rightful demand for justice. Moreover, individuals and organizations at every level within the Church should minister to handicapped persons by serving their personal and social needs.

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 HANDICAPPED PERSON AND THE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

Just as the Church must do all in its power to help insure handicapped people 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.

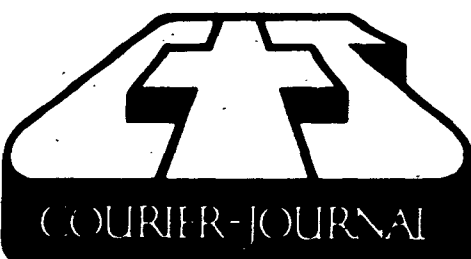
If handicapped people are to become equal partners in the Christian community, injustices must be eliminated, and ignorance and apathy replaced by increased sensitivity and warm acceptance. The leaders and the general membership of the Church must educate themselves to appreciate fully the contribution handicapped people can make to the Church's spiritual life. Handicapped 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 like courage, patience, perseverance, compassion, and sensitivity that should serve as an inspiration to all Christians.

In the case of many handicapped people, 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 handicapped individuals, make those liturgical adaptations which 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 the families, and especially the parents, of handicapped people. No family is ever really prepared for the birth of a handicapped 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 handicapped individuals 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.

PARISH LEVEL

For most Catholics the community of believers is embodied in the local parish. The parish is the door to participation for handicapped individuals, 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 handicapped people in parish life may challenge the ingenuity and commitment of the entire congregation.



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