

Importance

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 handicapped persons and their families is to be real and meaningful, the parish must prepare itself to receive them.

It may be necessary at this initial stage to place considerable emphasis upon educating the members of the parish community on the rights and needs of local handicapped people. 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 handicapped people 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 handicapped individuals 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 handicapped 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 handicapped people, 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 handicapped persons 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 handicapped individuals 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.

Handicapped people can also play a more active role in the liturgy if provided with proper aids and training. Blind parishioners can serve as lectors, for example, and deaf parishioners as special ministers of the Eucharist. We look forward to the day when more handicapped individuals 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 handicapped individuals 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 handicapped people 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 handicapped persons and for their participation in the liturgical life of the Church in *Sharing the Light of Faith*.



The U.S. bishops in a session of debating a position paper.

National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States.

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

DIOCESAN LEVEL

Efforts to bring handicapped people 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 handicapped 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 handicapped people. 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 handicapped individuals. They should serve as advocates for handicapped people seeking help from other agencies. Finally, they should monitor public policy and generate multifaceted educational opportunities for those who minister to and with handicapped people.

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 handicapped 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 handicapping 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 of 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 handicapped individuals, whether in parishes or some other setting.

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 handicapped people operating under Catholic auspices (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 handicapped students into programs for the non-handicapped. Moreover, in order to ensure handicapped individuals 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 handicapped people 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 handicapped individuals. Appropriate offices should also serve as resource and referral centers to both parochial and diocesan bodies in matters relating to the needs of our handicapped brothers and sisters.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Handicapped people 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 handicapped people. 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 handicapped individuals 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 with handicapped people, 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 with handicapped persons 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 handicapped people, 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 handicapped individuals, 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 handicapped people.

Support Programs for the Disabled