

# The sacraments are for all, including people with disabilities

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



## Five people in a pew — and one has a disability

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability, established in 1982, advocates for people with disabilities and provides resources to parishes on ways to be more inclusive.

Esther Garcia, director of outreach and diocesan relations, said one in five people live with a disability according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013 data.

“We all bring to the life of the Church gifts that God gave us,” Garcia said. “We need them, all these gifts that persons with disabilities bring to the table.”

“God loves us. ... He gives us grace and gifts in the sacraments and seeing as everyone is made in his image and likeness, everyone is deserving of those graces.” Lorraine Cekoric, of Christ the King Church in Little Rock, who worked as a special education teacher for 25 years

Garcia said there are several ways a parish can start to be more inclusive to people with disabilities:

- Training for ministry leaders or catechists “so they know how to work and be respectful of a person with a disability that’s present in the church.”
- While some parishes have an annual Mass for people with disabilities, Garcia said it’s important that they are included in regular Masses in any area they feel called to serve.

“They need to be in the parish, integrated into the regular Masses and participate in the way they want to,” she said. “We have to ask people with disabilities to read, to bring the gifts to the altar.”

- When planning a church event, be mindful of wheelchair accessibility, audible devices for the hearing impaired and other accommodations that might need to be made. Garcia said it’s important to list in fliers, on social media, online registration forms or any kind of event announcements the number of a trained volunteer who someone can call to prepare for any needed accommodations.
- Include a person with disabilities on a parish council or in some sort of leadership role in the parish. Whether it’s a building project or ministry needs, a person with a disability can “help you on how to be more accessible, more welcoming,” Garcia said.
- Designate a diocesan or parish disability advocate who has the knowledge, wisdom and expertise to minister to people with disabilities.

“Talk to them and reach out to them, ‘What do we need to do, how can we help them?’” Garcia said. “Sometimes they don’t feel like they’re welcome, they don’t feel like they can receive the sacraments. They have the same right to receive the sacraments” and be involved in the parish as every parishioner.

Garcia said above all, it’s important to “start welcoming and show that the person is part of the community. Just ask them, ‘What do you need?’ Sometimes the first question is, ‘How can I help?’ Smile to them ... make sure they encounter Christ.”

For more resources on ministering to people with disabilities, visit [ncpd.org](http://ncpd.org).

Debbie Dufford remembers distinctly the look on a young girl’s face after receiving first Communion.

“She was quadriplegic, non-verbal. She always went to church with her parents and watched them go to Communion,” Dufford said. “It was a little bit of the host because she normally had a feeding tube. But when she received she smiled, there was such a joy over her.”

Then there was the young boy, developmentally delayed, who “pumped his arms up in the air and said, ‘Wow,’” after first reconciliation.

“If we could all have that joy,” Dufford said.

Now retired, she spent more than 10 years as religious education director at St. Vincent de Paul in Rogers and helped prepare countless children for the sacraments. But she has made it an extra ministry to prepare children with disabilities for the sacraments, and still volunteers when needed in any of the classrooms.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 59 children are on the autism spectrum in the United States, one in 700 have Down syndrome and there are one million Americans that are legally blind and 12 million visually impaired.

“It’s just part of evangelization and serving in the Church. We have to recognize who needs what and be willing to reach out to them,” said Father Erik Pohlmeier, diocesan director of

faith formation. "... My own experience as a pastor was having families who have kids that want religious ed but have various special needs and always some frustration on wanting to meet them but not knowing how to meet them."

## **WHY TRY**

Long before the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops understood the need to be inclusive to people with disabilities in the life of the Church.

In 1978, the USCCB released the "Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities," which stated "The Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with (persons with disabilities)."

Father Pohlmeier said, "To follow the model of Jesus, we talk about Jesus loving everybody, but we see in practice that it was always displayed in a one-on-one contact. (Scripture) talks about the crowds always but then in the crowd, there was the woman that reached out and touched him and he stopped to interact with her, there was the leper that he stopped and touched, there was the boy with the two loaves and three fish that he used to serve everybody."

Author Dr. Lawrence R. Sutton pointed out in his book "How to Welcome, Include and Catechize Children with Autism and Other Special Needs," St. John Paul II's apostolic exhortation "On Catechesis in Our Time," which said that children with disabilities "have a right, like others of their age, to know the mystery of the faith."

In 1995, "Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities" was approved by the bishops to ensure parishes understood that providing sacraments to those with disabilities is a priority as it is with any other parishioner.

But for most parishes, knowing how to prepare those with special needs can be challenging.

Lorraine Cekoric, a member of Christ the King Church in Little Rock, worked as a special education teacher for 25 years. In both the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Diocese of Phoenix, Ariz., she worked to establish standard guidelines for preparing people with special needs for the sacraments that could be shared with parishes throughout the dioceses.

"Everyone says the same thing, 'We don't know what to do with these kids,'" Cekoric said, adding she moved to Little Rock two years ago before the panel of eight implemented the guidelines in Phoenix.

"For me, it goes back to one thing only — God loves us. And we were given that right to love him back. He gives us grace and gifts in the sacraments and seeing as everyone is made in his image and likeness, everyone is deserving of those graces."

## **WHERE TO START**

Both Cekoric and Dufford agree that developing a sacramental preparation plan for a child

with special needs must start with the parents. Cekoric said if a child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in school, that can reveal the child's learning style.

Dufford said in the early years, many parents just assumed their child could not handle sacramental preparation and would not ask.

In some cases, having the parent in the classroom is beneficial. There are some students with disabilities who thrive in a classroom setting with other children and others that need one-on-one attention or a classroom with just a few students.

"Church is community. Without community you don't really have Church. These children, as much as any of them, need to feel that. They need to feel accepted, they need to feel community," Dufford said, adding that it's also important for the parents to be active in their faith.

For those who can be with other students, it allows other children to learn about disabilities.

"It makes them realize 'I can be Christ to that child,' " Dufford said. "... They're going to come across people in the world not just like them and don't have attitudes just like them, and they have to adjust."

Dioceses vary in requirements for what those with disabilities must understand about the sacraments before receiving, but Cekoric said emphasizing the love of God is vital.

"One kid I worked with for three months just getting him to understand who God is. I went all the way back to creation," Cekoric said.

Some training may be needed for catechists working with children with special needs, but Dufford, though her background is in behavioral science, said, "I have no special training, no special skills. God does the teaching."

Focusing on the big picture and not allowing fear to prevent someone from catechizing is most important.

"Make sure you don't overlook those unique gifts the child has to share. We're too busy trying to beat the 'Our Father' into them we don't see what they have to give back," Cekoric said.

During a Mass, sometimes "you just have to make those little adjustments," Dufford said, recalling when she had to cover "one little boy during the sprinkling rite because it freaked him out."

In 2016, Bishop Anthony B. Taylor confirmed five children at St. Vincent de Paul in Rogers before the larger confirmation Mass with around 250 children.

The confirmation Mass, "Takes about three hours. That is too long for most of these children," Dufford said. During the service, there were readings, the Gospel and Bishop Taylor spoke about "what it means to be confirmed." The children were then able to celebrate with other students in the courtyard before the Mass. It allowed them to be a part of the larger group, Dufford said.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

From April 29-May 1, Father Pohlmeier, as well as Dufford, attended the Great Plains Regional Meeting of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability in Kansas City, Kan., learning a variety of information and hopes to brainstorm with people like Cekoric and others who might be able to assist in developing diocesan guidelines for parishes to better serve people with disabilities.

“The next step would have to be a conversation with people like (Cekoric) to say, ‘How do you even get the ball rolling?’” he said.

Although a diocesan plan would not be individualized enough, “you can create a diocesan policy that speaks about openness and willingness to help and identifies resources in order to provide that help.”

One statistic that has stuck with him was that 96 percent of the deaf community is “unchurched.” Even though it is one sector of people who are disabled, it’s clear that in many cases “we don’t know who they are,” he said.

“If you have a family member or a child that isn’t part of the community because of these needs, then identify yourself and help us to find a way for you,” Father Pohlmeier said.

Those interested can contact their local parish or Father Pohlmeier at (501) 664-0340, ext. 359 or [epohlmeier@dolr.org](mailto:epohlmeier@dolr.org).