

What do you think of when you hear the term “accessibility”? If you were called to a meeting on making your parish accessible, what image comes to mind? Chances are that it is a ramp, a physical ramp that allows people with mobility devices to enter the church building without having to use the stairs. Although the ramp is perhaps the most obvious representation of accessibility, it is also the most limiting. It can only assist parishioners with physical mobility problems or parents and caregivers of children in strollers. In reality, there are many other types of disabilities that affect the ability of parishioners to fully participate in the life of the parish. There are also other types of barriers to full accessibility. The Church recognizes this reality and exhorts pastoral ministers to work toward a parish culture in which persons with all types of disabilities are welcomed and included. We are asked to go beyond the ramp.

This booklet is a starting point for parish leadership teams and front-line parish staff to begin to discuss current accessibil-

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ity accommodations and strategies for future initiatives, both short and long term. It is intended for pastors and other clergy, DREs, pastoral associates, lay leaders, catechists, ministry leaders, hospitality ministers, social event coordinators, ushers, pastoral council members, and teachers. It is also important that parish secretaries be a part of the discussion, since they are often the first telephone contact for new parishioners or parishioners in need. This booklet is not meant to be an exhaustive presentation of all that one needs to know about physical accessibility but an initial exploration of ways that the parish may become more inclusive of persons with disabilities.

The two outside sources for this book will be the *Directory for Catechesis*, recently published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization (available on the Vatican website, vatican.va), and the 2017 revision of *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (available at usccb.org and cccb.org). The authors of the *Directory* are clear about the possibility of the enrichment and growth of the entire community by the inclusion of persons with disabilities in parish programs of catechesis. They call upon local churches to work to build a “culture of inclusion” (271). The USCCB *Guidelines*, while written for celebrating the sacraments with persons with disabilities, contains eight general principles that can also provide a framework on which to build a plan for fuller parish accessibility. This book will try to construct that framework for parish leaders and lead them into practical considerations for creating a fully accessible parish. Each section will include the identification of the principle, the corresponding excerpt from the *Guidelines*, the way that the principle can apply to the wider context of parish life, questions for discussion of your current situation, and a consideration

for taking concrete steps toward full accessibility. At the end, I will provide a short list of resources and links for further consultation.

SETTING THE STAGE

To help you to get started with thinking about accessibility at your parish, let us begin with a quiz:

1. List as many *visible* disabilities as you can.
2. Now list some *invisible* disabilities.
3. Thinking about the way that your parish works to include persons with disabilities, place a check mark next to the types of disabilities that are addressed in your parish accessibility plan. Are parishioners with these disabilities able to participate fully:
 - At Sunday Mass;
 - As liturgical ministers (lector, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, cantor, choir member, usher/greeter, altar server);
 - In catechetical programs;
 - As a catechist;
 - In parish group meetings in the parish hall;
 - At parish social events.

Dignity of the Human Person

All human beings are equal in dignity in the sight of God. Moreover, by reason of their Baptism, all Catholics also share the same divine calling.

How many times have we heard the term: “the dignity of the human person”? We hear it in homilies, parish social justice groups, and discussions on the right to life. Nevertheless, have we stopped to think about the depth of its meaning? Very early on in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read that “The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being” (CCC 27, citing *Gaudium et Spes* 19.1).

This means that God’s creation of human beings was not a two-tiered system: *every person* is created in God’s image and is called to communion with God. The dignity of the human person is at the foundation of all life issues and guides Catholic

moral and social teaching. How is this principle seen in parish life? In creating a fully accessible parish, the understanding of the dignity of *every* person should be at the heart of whatever actions we take toward building a parish culture of inclusion. Our decisions and actions, large and small, ought to reflect our awareness of this basic principle.

Since I began depending on a power chair for mobility nearly three years ago, I have experienced nothing but the goodness of people who want to help me to get through doors, carry things, etc. My experience, however, is obviously not shared by everyone who is in the vulnerable position of sitting in a wheelchair, lower than others. An assignment for a course I took through the University of Dayton, Disabilities in Parish Life, was to read a handout entitled “Disability Etiquette” (available at ncpd.org). It was a set of dos and don’ts for parish volunteers and staff. Along with helpful hints, such as asking before offering help and speaking at eye level rather than physically down to someone, was the line “Never pet anyone on the head.” Never *pet anyone on the head!* I was shocked that this treatment would have been common enough to warrant its inclusion in the list.

What would even that one small action communicate about the dignity of the person? The author of the handout was teaching parish ministers about performing actions that serve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in a culture of respect and dignity and avoiding actions that detract from it.

FOR DISCUSSION

- In your area of parish ministry, what is one thing that you do for persons with disabilities and their families that communicates that you understand how to treat people with the dignity that they deserve as God's children?

FOR FURTHER ACTION

- Make a list of practical actions that you will take to better communicate the dignity of each person with a disability, and his or her family or caregiver.
- What can be done right now? What longer-term action will you commit to doing as a parish, and when will you implement it?

Right to Full Participation

Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as fully as other members of the local ecclesial community. “Sacred ministers cannot deny the sacraments to those who seek them at appropriate times, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving them.”

A fully accessible parish includes access to the sacraments for parishioners with disabilities. The *Directory* reiterates: “Persons with disabilities are called to the fullness of sacramental life, even in the presence of severe disorders” (272). Sometimes judgments are made about the need for, or abilities of, persons with disabilities to be full participants in the sacraments. Such judgments are usually not made from ill will toward the recipient but from a misunderstanding either of the person being able to verbalize the desire for the sacrament in the same way as others, or even of the benefit of grace of the sacrament that is to be received. The *Directory for Catechesis* urges that catechists

of persons with disabilities “seek new channels of communication and methods more suitable for fostering the encounter with Jesus” (271). This requires both “suitable formation” for the catechist and excellent communication with family or caregivers. The entire parish community grows in charity and awareness when sacramental celebrations are fully inclusive.

It is also important to be aware of some of the barriers to the usual ways of celebrating the sacraments because of accessibility. Certain “freedoms” of access to the sacraments are often not available to parishioners with disabilities. They differ in degree from person to person, parish to parish, but can include anonymous confession; getting close to the baptismal font; receiving Holy Communion in a way that does not stand out to everyone, if one suffers from celiac disease; access to the parish office to make arrangements for a Mass intention; just popping in to any church for Mass or a visit; and being a little late without causing a scene if the seating area for persons with disabilities is in the front (sometimes *para transit* is running late). The refrain that I hear and read most often from people like myself who live with disabilities is that “we just want to be treated like everyone else.” On the one hand, this is impossible whenever an accommodation is made. On the other, every accommodation calls for pastoral sensitivity to the fact that the person with a disability may need time to become comfortable with the accommodation. For example, it may not seem like a big issue to parish staff that someone who must learn to avoid gluten should simply approach the altar in order to receive the Precious Blood. But to the parishioner, doing something so visibly different may initially be a source of embarrassment or discomfort. Awareness of the barriers at your parish and sensitivity toward the one being accommodated will advance the agenda of attaining fuller accessibility.

FOR DISCUSSION

- What policies are in place right now about access to the sacraments for persons with disabilities? Who is involved in making the decision about whether or not a person may proceed toward celebration of a sacrament? Does a family have open access to the pastor for such a discussion? To whom would a family go for recourse and further discussion if their loved one were denied a sacrament on the basis of a disability?
- Name some possible barriers faced by parishioners with disabilities who would like to participate in the sacramental life of the parish.

FOR FURTHER ACTION

- Based upon the discussion above, what can you do to ensure that everyone with contact with persons with disabilities knows the same procedures in order to communicate clearly with the family?
- Are there pastoral leaders and frontline workers who could benefit from further formation on admitting persons with disabilities to the sacraments? Consider asking someone from the diocese to give a webinar on the topic.
- What can be done to specifically address the removal of the barriers that you named above?