

Handbook for Adaptive Catechesis

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Handbook for Adaptive Catechesis

Serving Those With Special Needs

* *Nurturing different abilities*

* *Fostering strong spirits*

* *Growing into the community*

MICHELE E. CHRONISTER, MA

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First Edition

This book is dedicated to my dear friends at Logan Center, Sharing Meadows, Little Flower Catholic Church, Misericordia (especially those in McGowan home), and St. Pius X Catholic Church. You have all taught me so much, and I will always hold you dearly in my heart.

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Chapter 1

An Important Ministry

That I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me....Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me....For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9, 10b).

God's Grace, Our Weakness

This passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians appears once in the Sunday Lectionary cycle, and it just so happened to appear when I was working at a faith-based summer camp for individuals with disabilities or special needs. Having had little to no experience in this form of ministry, I was overwhelmed and humbled on a daily (maybe even hourly)

basis. This passage spoke right to my experience of ministry with those with disabilities—God worked through my weaknesses to show God’s strength.

As I continued in my ministry to individuals with disabilities, this passage took on new meaning. I began to see that these same words could be applied to the people I was working with, people whom the world viewed as weak and incapable. I began to think back to the stories of the saints as well as men and women from the Old Testament, and I realized that time and time again God chose to work through those the world considered weak and small.

A paramount example, of course, is the Blessed Mother. Although poor, humble, and uneducated, she was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus, *Theotokos* (God-bearer). We can find many other examples as well. Consider Saint Bernadette, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, or even Saint Paul. Both the Scriptures and Church history are replete with individuals the world thought little of—or even despised—and yet they were chosen by God in a very special way.

Special Needs—What to Consider

Individuals with disabilities are often forgotten and mistreated in modern society. We can fool ourselves into believing this isn’t true, pointing to things like closed-captioning television and handicapped parking spaces. Beyond that, though, they are often faced with problems such as inaccessibility or lack of adequate care. Consider your church, for example. Does your sanctuary have stairs or a ramp? Even parishes that consider this ministry important and are supportive of these individuals and their families often lack this basic necessity.

This is a very simple example, but what about the more serious matters, such as the lack of adequate physical care, to say nothing of spiritual care?

I have been blessed to know many wonderful families, organizations, and residential communities that support individuals with disabilities and offer them phenomenal care. However, I have found this to be the exception rather than the rule. The families and caregivers I've worked with have shared with me that individuals with severe disabilities are often relegated to nursing homes and state-run facilities (where they have little to no stimulation and only minimal care). They've also shared with me some of the opposition those with less severe disabilities encounter in schools and parishes. Even when the physical needs of these individuals are met, often their spiritual needs are not fully understood and realized.

Many of these individuals lack the opportunity to receive adequate catechesis, such as preparation to receive the sacraments and the opportunity to attend or fully participate in Sunday Mass. This is not even considering those exceptional individuals who desire to attend daily Mass, receive the sacrament of reconciliation regularly, or have a spiritual director. Rather, this is generally the current situation for all those with disabilities and in need of very basic catechetical instruction. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could create a vision for catechizing and welcoming these individuals on the fringes in our Church?

Called and Chosen—Members of God's Family

People with disabilities are baptized members of the Church, members of Christ's mystical body. This means that not only

are they loved by Christ and are cherished members of the Church, but it also means they have a valuable role to play in the Church. Often when we are considering ministry to those with disabilities, the focus is on what we can do for them. The focus, however, should be on what they are called to do and how we can help them do it.

Rather than a ministry focused merely on inclusion, what if our ministry went a step further to focus on a more profound form of inclusion—recognizing that those with disabilities have been given a unique vocation by God? What if our ministry focused on helping them live out their baptismal call by guiding them through the process of discerning their vocation, whatever that may mean for a particular individual?

For some, it may mean helping them recognize the joy they can bring to others and how God can work through that gift. For others, it could be discerning a call to one of the few religious communities set up to accommodate vocations from individuals with disabilities, and then helping them say yes to the unique call God has given them.

This moves this form of ministry beyond the small picture with concerns about how our catechetical programs function and how to place individuals in a faith-formation classroom into a larger focus. How is this individual called by God, and what can we do to help the person do the specific work he or she is being called to do? This moves our ministry beyond the focus on logistics (which are important but cannot be the end) to the purpose of why we do what we do.

All of this makes sense in light of Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. God chooses those the world considers small and weak to accomplish God's will. How can we support individuals with special needs on the road to sainthood? How

can we acknowledge that each of these persons has a unique vocation—a role in the Church that only he or she can play? This is the context in which we will consider this ministry.

Past and Present—Understanding the Church

To understand some foundations for the respect and love we are called to show those with disabilities, we must go back to the gospels and to Christ himself. At a time when illness or disability was thought to be a punishment for personal sin, Christ acknowledged that rather than punishment, it was a form of suffering. Through his love, respect, and attention to those who were crippled, blind, deaf, and mute, Christ set a precedent for the ministry we perform today.

The Church, however, has had a long history filled with ups and downs. In previous years, those with disabilities or special needs were often not welcomed into the Church in the way they should have been. Many were denied the Eucharist, reconciliation, or confirmation because they were thought to be incapable of understanding these sacraments. Much of this was a result of misunderstandings caused by the views of society. It is helpful to consider the era of the Church in which we live and what has come before.

We haven't always known as much about specific disabilities as we do now. For example, in the past those with Down syndrome were relegated to institutions where they were hidden from the rest of society. In that time period, those with disabilities were not welcome in society and probably wouldn't even have considered venturing into a church or asking for the sacraments, with the exception perhaps of baptism. The thought of having an altar server with Down syndrome was

inconceivable. This doesn't excuse the fact that those with disabilities have not previously been ministered to in the way they should, but it does help place it in context.

All of this began to change in the latter part of the twentieth century. A major contributing factor to this change was that we began to know more about those with disabilities. We began to realize that they had many capabilities and gifts and deserved to be treated with dignity and respect. At the same time various Church documents began to emerge that recognized the importance of ministry for those with special needs. In both the *General Directory for Catechesis* as well as the *National Directory for Catechesis*, the bishops emphasized the utmost importance of providing for the catechetical needs of those with disabilities.

The USCCB (then the National Conference of Catholic Bishops) also came out with a wonderful document in the 1970s, *Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with People with Disabilities*. In this document, the bishops give an overview of the modifications and considerations that need to be made for individuals with disabilities who are preparing to receive the sacraments. Since the release of the document, there has been an increased interest in providing catechesis for those with special needs. Even Pope Benedict XVI, in his recent Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist (*Sacramentum Caritatis*), briefly highlights the importance of making the Eucharist available to those with developmental disabilities.

There is certainly an interest in performing this ministry in the Church, but what is needed now are people willing to actually undertake the challenge. Presumably, if you are reading this right now, you are hoping to become one of those people!

What's Your Role?

The importance of this ministry cannot be overemphasized, not only for the Church but also for the individual Catholic. The most obvious beneficiary—the individual with a disability—clearly is positively impacted by the efforts of those wishing to include him or her in catechetical and ministerial opportunities. Beyond that is the next tier: friends and family of those with a disability are profoundly affected as well. I can affirm from firsthand experience that friends and family of an individual with a disability are greatly strengthened in their faith when a priest, religious, or layperson shows a desire to include and serve their loved one. Choosing to do this ministry delivers a message of hope, telling them, “You are not alone... you are always welcome in the Church!” To those who often face rejection everywhere they turn in society, this is a very powerful message.

However, the effects of choosing to do ministry with and for those with disabilities extend far beyond this inner circle. Once we begin this ministry, we soon learn that not only do we have something to give these individuals, but they truly have much to give us.

Christine's Story

The story of my friend Christine (all names have been changed for the sake of privacy) illustrates this truth.

Christine, a young woman in her early twenties with moderate cerebral palsy, lives in a Catholic-run facility for individuals with disabilities. I had met her the first summer I worked at this particular residential facility following my

sophomore year of college. A friend I was working with had developed a close friendship with Christine and often spoke to me about what an incredible young woman she was. It wasn't until I returned the following summer that I came to know Christine better.

My assignment that year included responsibilities in the particular home Christine lived in, as well as in the ministry office of the facility. In my conversations with her, I discovered that Christine possessed a very real faith but had lots of questions about that faith. Hers were deep questions, ones that affected the very core of her life and experience. However, always in the midst of those questions, she came back to her strong trust in God and her love for him.

In time, I had the privilege of becoming a sort of spiritual director to her (more of a spiritual friend), and we would meet throughout the week to discuss matters of faith. We went to Mass together, and once I even received special permission to take her to Mass and adoration at the parish adjoining the facility's campus. We walked together to the small Marian shrine down the road from her home, and we prayed together.

That summer I was in the midst of discerning some very large things in my own life (discerning marriage to the man who would later become my husband), and I was daily inspired by Christine and her trust in God. Even at times when things became difficult for her, she always trusted that God would provide. I became inspired to do the same, and from her I learned so much about God's love. She radiates it to everyone she meets.

The following summer Christine was a bridesmaid in my wedding, and she continues to be a good friend. This young woman truly had a special vocation from God—the gift of

loving friendship and trust—and the Church (and myself!)
is so much better because she has shared that gift.

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