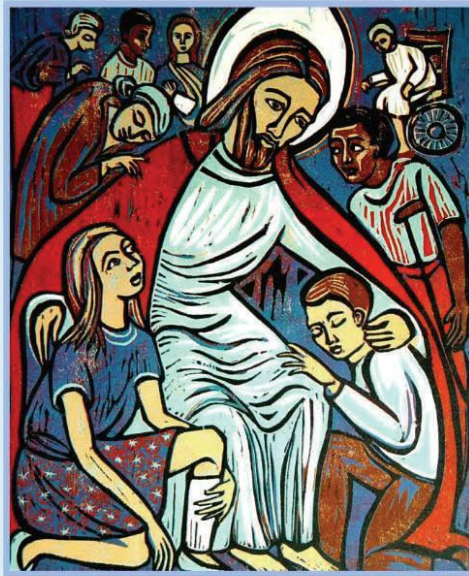




Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with **Persons with Disabilities**



*He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering
lambs in his arms. Is 40:11*

*“In the Diocese of San Jose, a disability—of itself—will never be used as a reason to deprive
someone from receiving the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation or Eucharist.”*

Bishop Patrick J. McGrath

Why do we catechize, why do sacraments exist... for the same reason that the Incarnation occurred. God desires access to our hearts and to our world and God will not rest until he has access to us for salvation.

These diocesan guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities are based upon the guidelines of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The USCCB guidelines were presented in 1995 to all who are involved in pastoral ministry with disabilities “to promote accessibility of mind and heart, so that all persons with disabilities may be welcomed at worship and at every level of service as full members of the Body of Christ.”

The U.S. Census reports, that approximately 20% of the population—one person in five—has some disability. One family in three has a member with a disability. “The whole community of faith needs to be aware of the presence of persons with special needs within it and be involved in their catechesis.” (*National Directory for Catechesis 49*)

The pastor guides the efforts to build a welcoming and inclusive community of faith. Persons with autism, Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities are capable of receiving faith formation, celebrating the sacraments of initiation and participating in the life of the parish. “*All persons with disabilities have the capacity to proclaim the Gospel and to be living witnesses to its truth within the community of faith and offer valuable gifts. They are not just the recipients of catechesis- they are also its agents.*” (*NDC 49*)

“Organization for catechesis for persons with disabilities should begin with (1) a careful determination of the number of Catholic persons in the community who have disabilities, and (2) a thorough assessment of their catechetical needs.” (*NDC 61:B.1*). For individuals with disabilities, meaningful and appropriate integration will require different forms of accommodation and varying forms of programming from full inclusion in the parish catechetical ministry to smaller group or individualized faith formation. Directors of Catechetical Ministry, coordinators and catechists need to seek out and utilize the resources of families, parishioners and diocesan personnel to support a process that can be accessible and meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Parishes that have more resources and personnel are encouraged to share with other parishes and collaborate in sponsoring catechetical instruction and formation for persons with disabilities.

A pastor has an obligation to provide catechetical formation to a person with a disability

The Code of Canon law affirms that it is the pastor’s obligation to allow for catechetical formation for persons with disabilities. Canon 773 states that catechesis of the faithful is the obligation of pastors. “It is a proper and grave duty especially of pastors of souls to take care of the catechesis of the Christian people so that the living faith of the faithful becomes manifest and active through doctrinal instruction and the experience of Christian life.” (can. 773) Then the Code goes on to specific groups within the parish community that should be given particular attention. Canon 777, #4 states that “the pastor, in accord with norms established by the diocesan bishop, is to ensure “that catechetical instruction is given also to those who are physically or mentally impeded, insofar as their condition permits.” This requires pastors to provide faith formation for persons with disabilities. This is to be done under the "norms established by the diocesan bishop."

Catholic Teachings on Persons with Disabilities

Here follow some Catholic teachings on persons with disabilities:

- *It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities... 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... Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations... [Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities](#), November 1978. Revised 1989*

Excerpts from [Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities](#), 1995:

- *By reason of their baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling (1)*
- *Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments ... Ministers are not to refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, who are properly disposed, and who are not prohibited by law from receiving them” (2)*
- *Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to person with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity... at least one fully accessible community be available in a given area. (3)*
- *Parishes should encourage persons with disabilities to participate in all levels of pastoral ministry... (5)*
- *A fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical accommodation to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners toward persons with disabilities (6)*

Baptism

- *Because it is the sacrament of universal salvation, baptism is to be made available to all who freely ask for it, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving. Baptism may be deferred only when there is no reason for hoping that the person will be brought up in the Catholic religion. (9)*

Confirmation

- *Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents or guardian to receive the sacrament of confirmation at the appropriate time. (16)*

Eucharist

- *The celebration of the Eucharist is the center of the entire Christian life. (19)*
- *The criterion for reception of Holy Communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely, that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally...If it is determined that a parishioner who is disabled is not ready to receive a sacrament, great care is to be taken in explaining the reasons... **Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament...**(20)*

Reconciliation

- *As long as the individual is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution....(23)*

National Directory of Catechesis

Excerpts from National Directory for Catechesis (49)

- *We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities...All persons with disabilities have the capacity to proclaim the Gospel and to be living witnesses to its truth within the community of faith and offer valuable gifts... **They are not just the recipients of catechesis- they are also its agents.***
- *The whole community of faith needs to be aware of the presence of persons with special needs within it and be involved in their catechesis.*
- *No family is ever really prepared for the birth of a disabled child. The Church's pastoral response in such situations is to learn about the disability, offer support to the family, and welcome the child. However, parishes should not assume that the parent of a child with a disability will serve as primary catechist. The level of parent participation should be tailored to meet the needs of the parent, the child with a disability and other students.*
- *Catechesis for persons with disabilities must be adapted in content and method to their particular situations.*
- *Specialized catechists should help them interpret the meaning of their lives and give witness to Christ's presence in the local community in ways they can understand and appreciate.*
- *Great care should be taken to avoid further isolation of persons with disabilities through these programs which, as far as possible, should be integrated with the catechetical activities of the parish.*
- *Catechetical efforts should be promoted by diocesan staffs and parish committees that include persons with disabilities.*

Pastoral Application

Pastoral leaders bear a particular responsibility in this area for they set the tone for the entire community. If a leader is unaware or insensitive to the needs of the disability community, then it is likely that this will be reflected in the wider community. Some of the ways to foster inclusion of people with disabilities include the following:

- Become knowledgeable about the different types of disabilities among the members of your own community, and offer the spiritual, moral, or physical supports that are needed to offer these individuals access.
- Be aware that when a member of your community becomes disabled, or has recently given birth to a child with a disability, they will need extra support. Do not wait for them to ask. Approach them and initiate conversation on an ongoing basis. Learn about the disability, offer support to the family and welcome the child. Follow the link for a [parent survey for catechesis for children with special needs.](#)
- Set up a "Committee on Disability Issues" to address a wider variety of disability related issues. Make sure that at least half the members of the committee are persons with disabilities. Invite a disability advocate to provide training on the new paradigms in disability philosophy to the committee. Agenda items should include (a) the moral implications of exclusion; (b) the religious meaning of disability; (c) the barriers to participation that people with disabilities and

their families might encounter in your community; (d) the physical access problems in buildings; follow the link for a [parish accessibility survey](#) (e) and how to attract and welcome those who are missing.

- Have an advocate for people with disabilities, preferably a person with a disability, as an ex-officio member of the pastoral council.
- Hire qualified people with disabilities.
- Include people with disabilities in a wide variety of volunteer leadership roles that are not just related to disability issues.
- Catechetical leaders should integrate adults, youth and children with disabilities into their programs as far as possible. Catechesis for some persons with disabilities requires personalization. The involvement of their families is indispensable.
- Catechetical leaders should become familiar with and use a variety of strategies for teaching that include multi-sensory materials.
- Follow the guidelines suggested for inclusive language and ways to preach the disability Scriptures.
- Catechesis for persons with disabilities must be adapted to culture.

Catechesis and Autism

Due to the rise of Autism to 1 in every 110 births in the United States and almost 1 in 70 boys, these guidelines address it specifically. There can be no one general response to Autism because there are so many differing forms to be considered. Autism is a spectrum disorder. This means it manifests a range of symptoms from mild to severe.

Symbolic catechesis is recommended as the catechetical methodology for those with autism. Symbolic catechesis is based upon the personal experience of God and the sacred derived through the senses and through relationship. Verbal communication is replaced with crafting or simple games. There is an atmosphere of community. Spirituality is fostered through an experience of liturgy, using symbols and actions and music and sharing of a simple meal.

Assistance and Training available upon request

Every parish should be able to respond to the needs of those with disabilities; however, it is important to note that not all parish communities may be qualified to provide catechetical formation for persons with disabilities. Pastors, catechetical leadership and parishioners should feel free to contact the Diocesan Office for Catechetical Ministry for consultation and training. In the Diocese of San Jose, the [Friends in Faith](#) committee supports ministry to persons with disabilities in the areas of awareness raising, accessibility, and catechetical resources.

- Contact Wendy Scherbart, Diocesan Director for Catechetical Ministry, wscherbart@dsj.org or 408-983-0138

- Diocese of San Jose [List for Consultants for Catechesis with Disabilities](#)

We hope these guidelines are helpful and serve as a resource. We welcome feedback; contact us at wscherbart@dsj.org or 408-983-0138.

Resources for Catechesis with those with Disabilities

Parishes in the Diocese of San Jose that offer specialized faith formation programs for Persons with Disabilities

For persons with autism and developmental disabilities

- St. Mary, Los Gatos, contact Terri Trotter, ttrotter@dsj.org
- Queen of Apostles (pilot), contact Pat Sarria, psarria@dsj.org
- St. Francis of Assisi, contact Peggy Bariteau, pbariteau@dsj.org

For persons who are hearing impaired or deaf

- Santa Teresa ldemanti@dsj.org, acalub@dsj.org

National Organizations and Resources

- [National Catholic Partnership on Disability-Catechesis](#)
- [University of Dayton NICE- Resources](#)
- [National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry](#)
- [National Catholic Office for the Deaf](#) – First Reconciliation

Document References

- [Pastoral Statement of U. S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities](#), 1978, rev. 1989.
- [Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities](#), 1995,
- [Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops](#), 1998.
- [National Directory for Catechesis](#), 2005.

Resources for Catechesis and Autism

- [Autism Society of America](#)
- *The Child with Autism Learns the Faith* by Kathy Labosh (www.laboshpublishing.com) Offers ready-to-go lesson plans for teaching the faith to children with Autism. Includes Bible lessons from the Garden of Eden to the Parting of the Red Sea
- *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* by Barbara Newman, Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2006. An interfaith primer offering practical suggestions for welcoming and including individuals with ASD into the full life of parish communities. Available from Friendship Ministries, 888-866-8966, www.Friendship.org

- *God's Love Embraces Autism: a Religious Formation Booklet for Children with Autism*, developed by the Diocese of Pittsburgh Dept. for Person with Disabilities. A black- and white picture book with photos of areas within a Catholic Church, and a brief narrative description. For more information, contact the office at 412-456-3119.
- *Awakening Spiritual Dimensions: Prayer Services with Person with Severe Disabilities* by Father Bill Gillum, OFM Cap., M. Ed., Author House. Offering a series of prayer services which use a sensory-based model allowing symbols, sight, sounds, aroma, touch, and people to bring about a sense of the sacred to all who have gathered for prayer. Order from Author House at 888-519-5121 or www.authorhouse.com

Resources for Sacramental Preparation for those with Disabilities

- *Catechists for All Children* by Dr. Joseph White and Ana Arista White, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2002. Offers insights and methods for accommodating unique emotional and behavioral needs in the classroom. Available from Our Sunday Visitor, 800-348-2440, <http://www.osv.com/>
Sacraments: Gifts for All Available in English and Spanish for Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation. A very solid resource developed by the Network of Inclusive Catholic Educators, Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, University of Dayton, Ohio. (888) 532-3389 or www.udayton.edu/~ipi/nice A variety of print and media resources are also available at this site.

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