

“A worshipper:” Sheer joy and an adult with disabilities at Mass



Pope Francis smiles at young Alberto di Tullio of Boiano, Italy on June 19: The Holy Father gave this special youth with Down's Syndrome a spin in his chair on the Popemobile after his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square. Photo: (Stringer/Italy/Reuters)

This past Sunday morning in Abingdon:

I saw the face of God yesterday morning in an older man with disabilities. He was the happiest-looking person at the 9 a.m. Mass at St. Francis de Sales in Abingdon.

Due to the extra hour from the end of Daylight Savings Time, my husband and I woke up before 6 a.m. Dogs have an internal clock and no understanding of this annual extra sleep so Daisy our pug was ready to go out bright and early. We decided to just stay up and enjoy more coffee time before breakfast.

Deciding to go to Mass at 9 a.m. instead of later seemed to be a good idea. Arriving at ten minutes before the hour revealed that everyone else in town had the same thought. The parking lot and the church were packed. I was lucky to get a regular chair along the side wall since all the pews were full.

As Mass was about to start, I noticed the sunshine of a smile from the nearby last pew where three men sat. The sweet man on the end closest to me was beaming from ear to ear, obviously delighted to be at church. When the cantor greeted the congregation and announced the page number, he grabbed his program and was ready to go.

I found out later that his name is Greg. A lady with the group whispered to me, “He’s a worshipper.” She was spot on.

I found myself to be praying with Greg. There was no doubt in my mind that I was

meant to be at that Mass at that time in that exact side seat. Our loving God had much to share with me yesterday morning through Greg.

Greg knew the responses and the order of the Mass. After each prayer he said his "Amen" loud and clear. He knew when to sit and stand, and when it was time to get his hymnal out. Greg hummed throughout the entire Mass. It was like music to my ears. When Father Chuck Wible asked for the new catechumens and their sponsors to stand for a blessing before being dismissed after the Liturgy of the Word, Greg proudly stood with them. He loved being involved and his huge smile reflected his joy. At Offertory he proudly held his dollar bill out for the collection basket.

When the time came for the Lord's Prayer, Greg quickly jumped out of his seat and came over to our side aisle grabbing the hand of the lady next to me. I found myself taking his other hand and he raised our hands up high as he proudly and lovingly recited the words. At the Sign of Peace he shook our hands and those of every person within reach, blessing us with his "Peace be with you." It was so touching. There were tears running down our faces.

Greg proudly walked up in the Holy Communion line with hands folded together and held high. He smiled broadly and said "Thank you" before his "Amen" to Deacon Jim Sullivan.

The lady who was with Greg and his friends had told me during the Sign of Peace that they had to leave after Holy Communion. But when Greg returned to his pew he promptly shook his head at her and knelt down with his hands folded. He was insistent that he was staying. And so they did. The rest of the group was probably in the car or van waiting for them, but Greg and this caring woman stayed for the closing prayer and the final blessing.

I found myself smiling through the entire Mass. Greg with his beautiful smile and proud Amen's are memories that I won't soon forget.

Church teaching on persons with disabilities:

The National Directory for Catechesis states that: "Persons with disabilities...are

integral members of the Christian community.

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. Their involvement enriches every aspect of Church life.

They [persons with disabilities] are not just the recipients of catechesis—they are also its agents.

All persons with disabilities or special needs should be welcomed in the Church. Every person, however limited, is capable of growth in holiness.

Some persons with disabilities live in isolating conditions that make it difficult for them to participate in catechetical experiences. “Since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty,” parishes should make that much more effort to include those who may feel excluded.

The Church’s pastoral response in such situations is to learn about the disability, offer support to the family, and welcome the child.” (NDC USCCB, Par. 49)

Church Resources:

Did you know that the Church has some wonderful resources available for those who have a family member with disabilities as well as for those who would like to do ministry in this area? The following links not only have excellent information for those in ministry, but many of these documents contain powerful meditations on the value of human life. They provide opportunities for reflection on the Church’s teaching about the sacredness of human life as every age and stage.



Check out the resources from the National Catholic Partnership on Disability [here](#);

The Archdiocese of Baltimore Office of Disabilities Ministry has many great

resources and is available to assist parishes, schools, and interested individuals in the effort to welcome and serve persons with disabilities: Read more [here](#).

Read “The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities” from the Archdiocese of Baltimore Office of Disabilities Ministry [here](#);

Archdiocese of Baltimore: Resources for Educators: Dignity of People with Disabilities

- ***Welcomed and Valued: Building Faith Communities of Support and Hope with People with Mental Illness and Their Families*** (96 pages) from the National Catholic Partnership on Disability. Read your full copy [here](#).
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- Read the “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities” [here](#);
 - Order a copy [here](#).
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Read the “Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities” [here](#); Order a copy [here](#).

Dennis McNulty, the Director of Catholic Charities Disability Services for the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio developed the following website to “provide Catholic teachings and suggestions to assist persons with disabilities to participate more fully in the Church.” He shares: “Since 1977 I have had the honor to be a teacher, a principal, and a director, each role drawing me more and more into the world of disabilities. The best thing about this journey is discovering how persons with disabilities have transformed me, especially in my concept of “personhood,” and in my belief on how God operates in the world. The perspectives of persons with disabilities have fundamentally changed my beliefs about almost everything.”

Enjoy learning more with the many excellent resources Dennis shares here.

Read about how his son Nathan is the inspiration behind Dennis McNulty’s special ministry here.

From the Office of Disability Services & Ministries of Cleveland Catholic Charities: “For over 20 years the Office of Disability Services & Ministries of Cleveland Catholic Charities has used this prayer to begin its meetings. It is prayed with persons with disabilities to remind us of our commonality and our God-given differences that enliven the church with a diversity of ministries and possibilities. Persons with disabilities teach us new ways to understand the human person and to understand the love of the God of all of us.”

“BEATITUDES FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS”

BLESSED ARE YOU who take time to listen to difficult speech, for you help us to know that if we persevere we can be understood.

BLESSED ARE YOU who walk with us in public places, and ignore the stares of strangers, for in your friendship we feel good to be ourselves.

BLESSED ARE YOU who never bid us to “hurry up” and, more blessed, you who do not snatch our tasks from our hands to do them for us, for often we need time rather

than help.

BLESSED ARE YOU who stand beside us as we enter new and untried ventures, for our unsuredness will be outweighed by the times when we surprise ourselves and you.

BLESSED ARE YOU who ask for our help and realize our giftedness for our greatest need is to be needed.

BLESSED ARE YOU who help us with the graciousness of Christ, for often we need the help we cannot ask for.

BLESSED ARE YOU when, by all things, you assure us that what makes us individuals is not our particular disability or difficulty but our beautiful God-given personhood which no handicapping condition can confine.

REJOICE AND BE EXCEEDINGLY GLAD for your understanding and love have opened doors for us to enjoy life to its full and you have helped us believe in ourselves as valued and gifted people.



Pope Francis spins Alberto around on his chair on the Popemobile on June 19 (AP Photo)

- Order your copy of "Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities" [here](#).

God is good!! All the time!!