

# Family, parish community team for special first Communion

**By Linda Norris-Waldt**

*Special to the Review*

MOUNT AIRY - In Matthew 19:14, Jesus said, "Let the children come to me."

Those words were brought to life in a country church in western Howard County May 16, when an 11-year-old girl, non-verbal and with special needs, received her first holy Communion.

Miranda Raday stepped forward with her brother, EJ, to receive the Eucharist from Father Michael J. Ruane, pastor of St. Michael, Poplar Springs, after eight months of studying the sacrament, the sign of the cross, Jesus and God.

"I will always remember," said Sharon Raday, her mother, "what Stacey (Ford) said to me at the beginning of Miranda's journey. 'The sacraments are a gift from Jesus, and Miranda deserves to receive them.'"

Ford, director of Religious Education at St. Michael, said she had never had a request for a child with special needs to receive a sacrament, but didn't hesitate when Sharon and her husband, Ernie, wanted Miranda included when her brother began instruction for reconciliation and Communion.

"The sacraments are for everyone," Ford said. "Any parent can bring their child forward if they will it."

Sharon Raday said that Miranda has no formal diagnosis for her disability. Unable to speak, she uses sign language to communicate. Her intellectual development is behind by about six years.

"We were just not sure how much Miranda could grasp about the topics and events that shape our faith," Sharon Raday said.

Ford contacted Bill Fleming, director of Disabilities Ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The two met with Miranda and her mother, and confirmed - almost by accident - that the young girl who could not communicate actually had a very robust sense of right and wrong.

During their interview, Miranda grew frustrated and swatted at her mom, who scolded her and immediately received her daughter's sign for, "I'm sorry."

"It was very clear that this child could distinguish when she is doing something on purpose that is unkind," Ford said.

With an adaptive first Communion curriculum supplied by the archdiocese and a special computer that serves as a communication tool for Miranda, the teaching tools were set. According to Sharon Raday, however, the best pieces to fall into place were people, rather than things. Ford found Kim Scott, a parishioner and special education teacher, who volunteered to spend every Tuesday evening – concurrent to EJ’s class – to provide Miranda one-on-one instruction.

Scott became Miranda’s teacher and friend, helping her to the last minute as girls and boys gathered in a classroom May 16 to prepare for their walk into Mass. Back in October, one of Scott’s first steps was to visit Miranda’s school environment at Mount Airy Middle.

“I was able to go to her school so that I could mimic the instructional technique that is used, and understand how she responds,” Scott said. “It is important in special education to keep a routine and practice new skills in the same environment over and over.”

They even had Miranda practice receiving the host at the altar for a full month with unconsecrated hosts so that she would recognize the action.

Miranda appears to understand church-going, as her family regular attends Mass, but there was the challenge of educating her about Jesus and God.

“We focused on very simple concepts,” Scott said, “that God loves Jesus, and Jesus loves Miranda.”

One of the most rewarding moments in the journey was when Miranda began to truly grasp the sign of the cross. She does not always succeed in making the complete motion, Scott said, but it is clear she knows what it is.

After the first Communion Mass, Father Ruane beamed as he posed for photos with the family. It had been many years, when he was a young priest at St. Agnes in Catonsville, since he had worked with a child with special needs for a sacrament.

“We need to get the word out and send more our way,” he said with a smile.

Ford said she is amazed that more parents do not request formation and sacraments for children with special needs, and hopes Miranda’s experience demonstrates that they can bring their children for instruction.

“I hope Miranda’s experience inspires other families, within the parish of St. Michael and beyond, to come forward and seek out receiving the sacraments, just like the other kids,” Raday said. “Having a kiddo with special needs, you kind of always have to find alternate ways to accomplish some of the things that come easily to typical kids.”

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