

Safeguarding Life and Truth

Welcome and Inclusion

One dinner roll remained in the basket. There were four when the waitress placed the basket on the table, but each of the three diners had taken and eaten one roll with the meal, leaving a solitary one. Would one of the men ask if either dinner companion wanted the roll? Or would one of the men simply grab the last roll and consume it? The matter was resolved when, without saying a word, Richard extended his hand into the basket, took the bread, broke it into three pieces, and gave each person a portion of the remaining roll. One could not help but feel the presence of Jesus in this breaking and sharing of bread. It was a very special spiritual moment.

Richard, who provided the evangelizing experience for his companions, happens to be developmentally disabled. While he does not know his birthday or how old he is, Richard has a simplicity of faith that is a model for others. He feels God's love and loves God in return, as well as his family, friends, and everyone with whom he has contact. He is an example of how God raises the lowly and, through them, demonstrates that all life is precious and blessed.

Perhaps this true story will prompt thoughts about our Lord and the breaking of bread, the Emmaus story, or of Eucharist. It might also give us pause to think about the challenge to see Jesus in each other and to carry forward the Gospel message to love all persons as ourselves. As St. Paul relates in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; all are one in Christ Jesus." The Catholic Church has provided strong leadership for the welcome and inclusion of all persons in our parishes. Thirty years ago the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a "Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities." The Bishops began the Statement by declaring, "The same Jesus who heard the cry for recognition from the disabled of Judea and Samaria two thousand years ago calls us, his followers, to embrace our responsibility to our own disabled brothers and sisters in the United States. The Catholic Church pursues its mission by furthering the spiritual, intellectual, moral and physical development of the people it serves."

On the 30th anniversary of the pastoral statement, the bishops continue to confirm that all have a place in our church. "As pastors of the Church in America, we are committed to working for a deeper understanding of both the pain and potential of our neighbors who are blind, deaf, mentally disabled, emotionally impaired; who have special learning problems; or who suffer from single or multiple physical disabilities-all those whom disability may have set apart." The bishops call upon the church to welcome and promote the well being of those with special needs and to realize and utilize the giftedness of each person. Speaking with Kelly, the mother of a child with Down Syndrome, I was struck by the amount of advocacy required to assure that her daughter received equal treatment, including acceptance into the parish's religious education program. To Kelly, her husband and daughter, and for all persons, it is important to have each person accepted for who and what they are. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops have said, "We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate church for persons with disabilities."

Jesus expanded people's perception of God through his life and his stories about the Good Samaritan, Zacchaeus, the lost sheep, the Prodigal Son and many others. Called to evangelize, the church continues to advocate for the safeguarding of life for the unborn, the disabled, the deaf and hard of hearing and the elderly. As Catholics, we respect the dignity of life and support the sacredness of life from conception until death. Indeed, we are our neighbor's keeper and are responsible for one another. As the Bishops noted in the pastoral statement, "No one would deny that every man, woman, and child has the right to develop his or her potential to the fullest. With God's help and our own determination, the day will come when that right is realized in the lives of all persons with disabilities." It is wonderful that our church shows pastoral concern for disabled individuals. Let us together make a concerted effort to reach out in faith to persons with disabilities and welcome them and their families into our parishes.

**Quotes are from the U.S. Bishops Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities and from the National Directory for Catechesis.*

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