

Sister, families paved path for inclusion

Jesus said that “the meek will inherit the earth.” Years ago, a woman I knew cynically responded, “The meek will inherit the earth when the bold are finished with it!” Her cynical comment may indeed be closer to the ‘truth’ as the way the world operates. Arrogance, power and wealth do indeed seem to run the world.

Yet, if you spend any amount of time with Bill Fleming, coordinator of catechesis for the developmentally disabled for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, you will see a different world.

Recently, I was with Bill as part of an afternoon of retreat for the developmentally disabled, and their families and caregivers at Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriottsville – an excellent place, incidentally, to schedule a parish, school or group retreat.

About a half-hour into my opening talk, I paused and asked the group if there were any questions or sharing. A young lady with Down syndrome stood up and said in a very slow and precise way, “All I know is that Jesus loves us all, and that he lives in our hearts.” I commented that she had given the best sermon that day.

There are few people that I admire more than parents, families and caregivers to the developmentally disabled. In a world where everyone seems to want ‘perfect children,’ the developmentally disabled will never meet societal expectations of perfection. They are perfect only in God’s eyes, and in the eyes of those who love them.

In my own lifetime, I remember a time when children with Down syndrome, or other developmental disabilities, were kept at home, out of sight. Even the church didn’t always know how to minister to them.

But people like the late Sister Justa Walton, I.H.M., would usher in a new era for them. She would insist that they enter into the full sacramental life of the church. She encouraged parents to take them to church and to proudly sit in the front of the

church, not hiding in the shadows. They would make public first Communion and confirmations. Sister Justa even prevailed on Cardinal J. Francis Stafford to install Francis as the first developmentally disabled eucharistic minister. If you could have seen the glow on Francis' face as he distributed Communion, you would never doubt the real presence.

In addition to the sacramental ministry, Sister Justa early advocated for group homes, so that developmentally disabled people could leave home and attain adult status in supervised settings. Parents would no longer have to face old age and death wondering who would care for their disabled child. Gallagher Services and other services can trace their roots to early advocacy efforts of people like Sister Justa.

Parents, families and caregivers of the developmentally disabled are true heroes of the pro-life movement. They don't just have children, but they deal with the limits and the demands of those limitations for a lifetime.

At the same time, they reveal the spiritual simplicity of people with disabilities. As I've said often, "I've never seen anyone with Down syndrome blow anyone up, wage a war or develop a bomb. Why do we think that we're normal and that they are disabled?"

In this month of May, Mary's month, we see in the developmentally disabled the fulfillment of the words of Mary in her beautiful prayer, the Magnificat: "God has raised the lowly to high places."

At the end of time, who do you think will have the first seats in the kingdom of God: the arrogant, the powerful and the wealthy, or those who only know how to hug, to love and to understand God's love?

To re-quote the young lady: "All I know is that God loves us, and that he lives in our hearts."

What else is there to know?