

“Only by recognizing the rights of its weakest members can a society claim to be founded on law and justice: the disabled are not different from other people which is why, in recognizing and promoting their dignity and rights, we recognize and promote our own dignity and rights and those of each one of us.” Message

of John Paul II on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person, January 5, 2004, n. 3.

How YOU can recognize and promote the rights of people with disabilities:

- *There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities. We are one flock that follows a single shepherd.* US Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities.
- Support the Archdiocese of Baltimore’s **Camp GLOW (God Loves Our World)**, a week-long residential summer camp for adults with developmental disabilities. For more information about this incredible ministry, please visit <http://www.archbalt.org/evangelization-catechesis/special/camp-glow.cfm> or contact Bill Fleming at (410) 547-5410 or bffleming@archbalt.org.
- Understand and show others that the welcome and inclusion of all persons, including those with disabilities, is a duty of our Church, with special preference for those in greatest need.
- Welcome all persons with disabilities into the parish community and embrace successful parish-based programs.
- Promote social and physical environments that enhance human relations and create for mentally ill persons a sense of belonging to a community.
- Foster the healthy development of children, including their mental functioning.



“[O]ur faith helps us to break open the horizon beyond our own selves in order to see life as God does. God’s unconditional love, which bathes every human individual, points to a meaning and purpose for all human life.”
His Holiness Benedict XVI, St. Joseph Seminary, Yonkers, NY, April 19, 2008.

Excerpts from the Message of John Paul II on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person.

From the Vatican, 5 January 2004

... even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature. Indeed, human beings, independently of the conditions in which they live or of what they are able to express, have a unique dignity and a special value from the very beginning of their life until the moment of natural death. The disabled person, with all the limitations and suffering that scar him or her, forces us to question ourselves, with respect and wisdom, on the mystery of man. In fact, the more we move about in the dark and unknown areas of human reality, the better we understand that it is in the more difficult and disturbing situations that the dignity and grandeur of the human being emerges. The wounded humanity of the disabled challenges us to recognize, accept and promote in each one of these brothers and sisters of ours the incomparable value of the human being created by God to be a son in the Son.

The quality of life in a community is measured largely by its commitment to assist the weaker and needier members with respect for their dignity as men and women.

The world of rights cannot only be the prerogative of the healthy. People with disabilities must also be enabled to participate in social life as far as they can, and helped to fulfil all their physical, psychological and spiritual potential.

... A society that made room only for its fully functional, completely autonomous and independent members, would be unworthy of the human being. Discrimination on the basis of effectiveness is just as disgraceful as racial, gender or religious discrimination. A subtle form of discrimination is also present in politics and educational projects that seek to conceal or deny the deficiencies of disabled people by proposing lifestyles and objectives that do not correspond to their reality and turn out to be unjust and frustrating. Indeed, justice calls for continual and loving attention to the lives of others and a response to the special and different needs of every individual, taking into consideration his or her abilities and limitations.

On Responsibilities to Those with Disabilities

Recognition of their rights must be followed by a sincere commitment on the part of all to create practical living conditions, structures which provide support and legal protection that can respond to the needs and dynamics of the growth of disabled persons and of those who are involved in their situation, beginning with their families. Over and above any other consideration or individual or group interest, no effort must be spared in promoting the integral good of these people. Nor can they be denied the support and protection they need, even if this entails a greater financial and social burden. The mentally handicapped need perhaps more attention, affection, understanding and love than any other sick person: they cannot be left alone, unarmed and defenseless, as it were, in the difficult task of facing life.

... To show disabled persons that we love them means showing them that we value them. Attentive listening, understanding their needs, sharing their suffering, patience in guidance, are some of the ways to introduce the disabled into a human relationship of communion, to enable them to perceive their own value and make them aware of their capacity for receiving and giving love.

Revelation of the Mysterious Beauty of Christ

There is no doubt that in revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of pain. In this world of ours that approves hedonism and is charmed by ephemeral and deceptive beauty, the difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problems as burdens to be removed or resolved as quickly as possible. Disabled people are, instead, living icons of the crucified Son. They reveal the mysterious beauty of the One who emptied himself for our sake and made himself obedient unto death. They show us, over and above all appearances, that the ultimate foundation of human existence is Jesus Christ. It is said, justifiably so, that disabled people are humanity's privileged witnesses. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance, a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God who became incarnate, who was crucified and rose for us.