



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NCPD Autism Task Force Encourages Parishes to Observe April as Autism Awareness Month

February 11, 2011, Washington, D.C....April is Autism Awareness Month. The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) calls on parishes and dioceses to observe this commemorative month. The NCPD website has resources for this observation such as Prayers of the Faithful and a bulletin announcement to support your ministry at www.ncpd.org. The NCPD Autism Task Force (Task Force) joins with others across our nation to support efforts of dioceses and parishes in their ministry to and with people with autism and their families.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the fastest growing significant disability in the U.S., with as many as 1 in every 110 children now identified with this disorder, making it an increasingly pressing need that ministry resources be developed. NCPD convened the first meeting of the Task Force in November, 2010 to consider this need. It is co-chaired by Dr. Mary Beth Walsh, Adjunct Professor, Caldwell College, NJ, and Kate Coughlin, MS EI/ECSE, Oregon Health and Science University, Portland OR, both experts in ASD. The Task Force includes leaders in ministry, catechesis and autism from across the country, two of whom are parents of children with ASD, and is staffed by Dr. Nancy Thompson, NCPD Director of Programs and Diocesan Relations.

Dr. Nancy Thompson explains, “NCPD understands that it is a challenge when you are asked to serve those whom you feel unequipped to serve, and that is why we exist, to help provide support and resources to parishes and dioceses across the United States. Our office was created in 1982 to help dioceses implement the 1978 *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities* and related teachings of the Church.”

She assures that “Contrary to what is sometimes thought, the Church has a history of speaking eloquently and calling to service on behalf of people with disabilities.”

In its 1995 Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, Par. 5, “ In accord with canon 777, no. 4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities...Parish catechetical and sacramental preparation programs may need to be adapted for some parishioners with disabilities...Dioceses are encouraged to establish appropriate support services for

pastors, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities. **Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities**, Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995.

The Church's pastoral response in such situations is to learn about the disability, offer support to the family, and welcome the child. **National Directory for Catechesis: Catechesis with Persons with Disabilities** (no. 49), Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005.

NCPD stands ready through the Task Force, its website and resources to help parishes fulfill this call.

ASD is a life-long, neurological developmental disability that ranges from mild to severe. Usually diagnosed before age three, people with ASD often have difficulties with language, with relating to others socially, and may engage in repetitive or restricted patterns of behavior. ASD is not well understood, but seems to have a significant genetic component and may also be affected by environmental triggers not yet identified. ASD is diagnosed in equal numbers across all racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups, but occurs four times more frequently in boys than in girls. For more information about autism spectrum disorders, go to www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. For pastoral resources, visit the website of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, <http://www.ncpd.org/ministries-programs/specific/autism>.

In a recent national survey of parishes and dioceses conducted by the Task Force, more than 450 responses were received from 79 different (arch) dioceses across 34 states. The data is currently being analyzed, but early review indicates 40.5% of respondent parishes offer specific supports or programs to facilitate the inclusion of people with ASD and their families. The top four responses to the question "What do you see as most needed to further the welcome and engagement for parishioners on the autism spectrum and their families" included:

1. Parish awareness/education resources
2. Catechetical resources for accommodating learning needs for people with ASD
3. Models of family support
4. And availability of consultants with expertise in ASD.

As the data is evaluated, it will provide valuable information to the Task Force which will help it determine how NCPD proceeds with development and provision of resources that are identified as needed. This survey will soon be available in Spanish.

Both parishes and families have indicated a strong desire to enrich the lives of their Catholic community by broadening their understanding of autism spectrum disorder.

As expressed by a parent, "...be patient and understanding. It's hard enough for us as parents. We want our children to be accepted and to be able to receive the Sacraments even if it takes a little longer. It's well worth it. I am truly blessed."

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NCPD AUTISM RESOURCES

The NCPD Autism Task Force, founded in November, 2010 by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), seeks to serve the U.S. Catholic Church through identifying the state of current ministry with people with autism spectrum disorders, collecting and developing resources on the NCPD website for this ministry, and advising NCPD on future training and resource development. The Task Force encourages parishes and dioceses to observe April as Autism Awareness Month, and has developed pastoral resources to aid in this effort. Additional resources and links to other organizations to assist parishes and families in supporting the needs of Catholics with autism spectrum disorders can be found on the NCPD website at the following link: <http://www.ncpd.org/ministries-programs/specific/autism>.

For more information, contact NCPD Director of Programs and Diocesan Relations, Dr. Nancy Thompson at 319-270-6923 or nthompson@ncpd.org.