

## **Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities**

In November 1978, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops approved for publication a pastoral statement on persons with disabilities. Therein the bishops called for broader integration of persons with disabilities into the full life of the Church, through increased evangelization and catechesis and by participation in the Church's sacramental life. In 1988, the bishops reaffirmed this call to participate fully and actively in the life of the Church in a resolution marking the tenth anniversary of the 1978 pastoral statement. The present document is a further contribution to the efforts of the Church to advocate for ministry to and with persons with disabilities. It was prepared by the Committee on Pastoral Practices in response to requests for further clarification and guidance about the means for providing fuller access to the sacraments by persons with disabilities. The *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* was approved by the general membership of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on June 16, 1995. It is authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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General Secretary

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*These guidelines are presented to all who are involved in pastoral ministry with persons with disabilities. They reaffirm the determination expressed by the bishops of the United States on the tenth anniversary of the pastoral statement on persons with disabilities "to promote accessibility of mind and heart, so that all persons with disabilities may be welcomed at worship and at every level of service as full members of the Body of Christ."*

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It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the life of the Church, even by passive omission, is to deny the reality of that community. Accessibility involves far more than physical alterations to parish buildings. Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the eucharist and other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments of reconciliation, confirmation, and anointing of the sick (*Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, November 1978; revised 1989*).

### **Preface**

Catholics with disabilities, as well as those who minister to or with them, often point out that pastoral practice with regard to the celebration of the sacraments varies greatly from diocese to diocese, even from parish to parish. Inconsistencies arise in such areas as the provision of sign language interpreters for persons who are deaf, in the accessibility of church facilities for persons with mobility problems, and in the availability of catechetical programs for persons with developmental and mental disabilities. Pastoral inconsistencies may occur in other areas as well.

The inconsistencies in pastoral practice often arise from distinct yet overlapping causes. Some result from a misunderstanding about the nature of disabilities. Others arise from an uncertainty about the appropriate application of Church law towards persons with disabilities. Others are born out of fear or misunderstanding. Still others are the result of a studied and honest acceptance of the realistic limitations of a parish's or diocese's available resources.

These guidelines were developed to address many of the concerns raised by priests, pastoral ministers, other concerned Catholics, persons with disabilities, their advocates and their families for greater consistency in pastoral practice in the celebration of the sacraments throughout the country. With this objective in view, the guidelines draw upon the Church's ritual books, its canonical tradition, and its experience in ministering to or with persons with disabilities in order to dispel any misunderstandings that may impede sound pastoral practice in the celebration of the sacraments. It is our hope that the guidelines will complement diocesan policies already in existence.

The bishops of the United States offer the "*Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*" in order to give a more concrete expression to our longstanding concern for "realistic provision" for the means of access to full sacramental participation for Catholic persons with disabilities. While they do not address every conceivable situation that may arise in pastoral practice, the guidelines present a set of general principles to provide access to the sacraments for persons with disabilities. Diocesan staff, pastoral leaders, catechists, parishioners, health care workers, and all those who minister to or with Catholics with disabilities are invited and encouraged to reflect upon and accept these guidelines in their continuing effort to bring Christ's healing message and call to justice to the world.

## **I. General Principles**

1. By reason of their baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God, and have the same divine calling.

2. Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community (Cf. canon 213). Ministers are not to refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, who are properly disposed, and who are not prohibited by law from receiving them (Cf. canon 843, sect. 1).

3. Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity. Pastoral ministers should not presume to know the needs of persons with disabilities, but rather they should consult with them or their advocates before making determinations about the accessibility of a parish's facilities and the availability of its programs, policies, and ministries. These adaptations are an ordinary part of the liturgical life of the parish. While full accessibility may not always be possible for every parish, it is desirable that at least one fully accessible community be available in a given area. Parishes may, in fact, decide to collaborate in the provision of services to persons with disabilities.

4. Since the parish is the center of the Christian experience for most Catholics, pastoral ministers should make every effort to determine the presence of all Catholics with disabilities who reside within a parish's boundaries. Special effort should be made to welcome those parishioners with disabilities who live in institutions or group homes and are unable to frequent their parish churches or participate in parish activities. However, pastoral ministers should remember that many persons with disabilities still reside with

their families. Pastoral visitation, the parish census, and the diverse forms of parish and diocesan social communication are just a few of the many ways in which the pastoral staff can work towards the inclusion of all parishioners in the parish's sacramental life.

5. In accord with canon 777, n.4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities. Persons with disabilities, their advocates and their families, as well as those knowledgeable in serving disabled persons can make a most valuable contribution to these programs. Parish catechetical and sacramental preparation programs may need to be adapted for some parishioners with disabilities. Further, parishes should encourage persons with disabilities to participate in all levels of pastoral ministry (e.g., as care ministers, catechists, etc.). Dioceses are encouraged to establish appropriate support services for pastors to facilitate the evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities.

6. The creation of a fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical accommodation to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners towards persons with disabilities. Pastoral ministers are encouraged to develop specific programs aimed at forming a community of believers known for its joyful inclusion of all of God's people around the table of the Lord.

7. In the course of making pastoral decisions, it is inevitable that pastoral care workers will encounter difficult cases. Dioceses are encouraged to establish appropriate policies for handling such cases which respect the procedural and substantive rights of all involved, and which ensure the necessary provision of consultation.

## **II. Particular Sacraments**

### **Baptism**

8. Through the sacrament of baptism the faithful are incorporated into Christ and into his Church. They are formed into God's people and obtain forgiveness of all their sins. They become a new creation and are called, rightly, the children of God. (*Rite of Christian Initiation*, General Introduction, n. 1).

9. Because it is the sacrament of universal salvation, baptism is to be made available to all who freely ask for it, are properly disposed, and are not

prohibited by law from receiving it. Baptism may be deferred only when there is no reason for hoping that the person will be brought up in the Catholic religion (Canon 868, sect. 1, n. 2). Disability, of itself, is never a reason for deferring baptism. Persons who lack the use of reason are to be baptized provided at least one parent or guardian consents to it (Canons 868, sect. 1, n. 1 and 852).

10. So that baptism may be seen as a sacrament of the Church's faith and of admittance into the people of God, it should be celebrated ordinarily in the parish church on a Sunday or, if possible, at the Easter Vigil (Canons 856 and 857). The Church, made present in the local community, has an important role to play in the baptism of all of its members. Before and after the celebration of the sacrament, the baptized have the right to the love and help of the community (Cf. *Rite of Baptism for Children*, nn. 4, 10).

11. Either personally or through others, the pastor is to see to it that the parents of an infant who is disabled, or those who take the place of the parents, are properly instructed as to the meaning of the sacrament of baptism and the obligations attached to it. If possible, either the pastor or a member of the parish community should visit with the family, offering them the strength and support of the community which rejoices at the gift of new life, and which promises to nurture the faith of its newest member. It is recommended that preparation programs for baptism gather several families together so that they may commonly be formed by pastoral direction and prayer, and so that they may be strengthened by mutual support (Canon 851, n. 2).

12. If the person to be baptized is of catechetical age, the Rite of Christian Initiation may be adapted according to need (Cf. canons 851, n. 1 and 852, sect. 1).

13. A sponsor is to be chosen who will assist the newly baptized in Christian initiation. Sponsors have a special role in fostering the faith life of the baptized person. As such, they are to be chosen and prepared accordingly. Persons with disabilities may be sponsors for these sacraments of initiation.

## **Confirmation**

14. Those who have been baptized continue on the path of Christian initiation through the sacrament of confirmation. In this way, they receive the Holy Spirit, conforming them more perfectly to Christ and strengthening them so

that they may bear witness to Christ for the building up of his body in faith and love (*Rite of Confirmation*, nn. 1-2).

15. Parents, those who care for persons with disabilities, and shepherds of souls--especially pastors--are to see to it that the faithful who have been baptized are properly instructed to receive the sacrament of confirmation and to approach it at the appropriate time (Cf. canon 890). The diocesan bishop is obliged to see that the sacrament of confirmation is conferred on his subjects who properly and reasonably request it (Canon 885, sect. 1).

16. All baptized, unconfirmed Catholics who possess the use of reason may receive the sacrament of confirmation if they are suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew their baptismal promises (Canon 889). Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents or guardian, to receive the sacrament of confirmation at the appropriate time.

17. Confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful between the age of discretion (which is about the age of seven) and eighteen years of age, within the limits determined by the diocesan bishop, or when there is a danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause urges otherwise.

18. A sponsor for the one to be confirmed should be present. The sponsor assists the confirmed person on the continuing path of Christian initiation (Cf. canon 892). For this reason, it is desirable that the one who undertook the role of sponsor at baptism be the sponsor for confirmation (Canon 893, sect. 2).

## **Eucharist**

19. The eucharist is the most august sacrament, in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered, and received, and by which the Church constantly lives and grows. It is the summit and the source of all Christian worship and life, signifying and effecting the unity of the people of God, providing spiritual nourishment for the recipient, and achieving the building up of the Body of Christ. The celebration of the eucharist is the center of the entire Christian life (Canon 897).

20. Parents, those who take the place of parents, and pastors are to see to it that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the eucharist as early as possible. Pastors are to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of

reason or whom they judge are not sufficiently disposed (Canon 914). It is important to note, however, that the criterion for reception of holy communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely, that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally. Pastors are encouraged to consult with parents, those who take the place of parents, diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, psychologists, religious educators, and other experts in making their judgment. If it is determined that a parishioner who is disabled is not ready to receive the sacrament, great care is to be taken in explaining the reasons for this decision. Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament. The existence of a disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from receiving the eucharist.

21. Eucharistic celebrations are often enhanced by the exercise of the diverse forms of ministry open to the laity. In choosing those who will be invited to use their gifts in service to the parish community, the parish pastoral staff should be mindful of extending Christ's welcoming invitation to qualified parishioners with disabilities.

## **Reconciliation**

22. In the sacrament of reconciliation, the Christian faithful obtain from the mercy of God pardon for their sins. At the same time, they are reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which works for their conversion by charity, example, and prayer (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 11).

23. Only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing serious sin. Nevertheless, even young children and persons with mental disabilities often are conscious of committing acts that are sinful to some degree and may experience a sense of guilt and sorrow. As long as the individual is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution. Those with profound mental disabilities, who cannot experience even minimal contrition, may be invited to participate in penitential services with the rest of the community to the extent of their ability.

24. Catholics who are deaf should have the opportunity to confess to a priest able to communicate with them in sign language, if sign language is their primary means of communication. They may also confess through an approved sign language interpreter of their choice (Canon 990). The

interpreter is strictly bound to respect the seal of confession (Canons 983, sect. 2 and 1388, sect. 2). When no priest with signing skills is available, nor sign language interpreter requested, Catholics who are deaf should be permitted to make their confession in writing. The written materials are to be returned to the penitent or otherwise properly destroyed.

25. In the case of individuals with poor communication skills, sorrow for sin is to be accepted even if this repentance is expressed through some gesture rather than verbally. In posing questions and in the assignment of penances the confessor is to proceed with prudence and discretion, mindful that he is at once judge and healer, minister of justice as well as of mercy (Canons 978, sect. 1; 979; 981).

### **Anointing of the Sick**

26. Through the anointing of the sick, the Church commends to the suffering and glorified Lord the faithful who are seriously ill, so that they may be relieved of their suffering and be saved (Canon 998).

27. Those who have the care of souls and those who are close to the sick are to see to it that the faithful who are in danger due to sickness or old age are supported by the sacrament of anointing at the appropriate time (Canon 1001).

28. Since disability does not necessarily indicate an illness, Catholics with disabilities should receive the sacrament of anointing on the same basis and under the same circumstances as any other member of the Christian faithful (Cf. canon 1004).

29. The anointing of the sick may be conferred if the recipient has sufficient use of reason to be strengthened by the sacrament, or if the sick person has lost the use of reason and would have asked for the sacrament while in control of his or her faculties (*Rite of Anointing*, nn. 12, 14). If there is doubt as to whether the sick person has attained the use of reason, the sacrament is to be conferred (Canon 1005). Persons with disabilities may at times be served best through inclusion in communal celebrations of the sacrament of anointing (Cf. canon 1002).

### **Holy Orders**

30. By divine institution, some among the Christian faithful are constituted sacred ministers through the sacrament of orders. They are consecrated and



deputed to shepherd the people of God, each in accord with his own grade of orders, by fulfilling in the person of Christ the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing (Canon 1008).

31. The existence of a physical disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from holy orders. However, candidates for ordination must possess the necessary spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological qualities and abilities to fulfill the ministerial functions of the order they receive (Canons 1029 and 1041, n. 1). The proper bishop or competent major superior makes the judgment that candidates are suited for the ministry of the Church (Canons 241, sect. 1; 1025, sect. 2; 1051, n. 1). Cases are to be decided on an individual basis and in light of pastoral judgment and the opinions of diocesan personnel and other experts involved with disability issues.

32. Diocesan vocations offices and offices for ministry with persons with disabilities should provide counseling and informational resources for men with disabilities who are discerning a vocation to serve the Church through one of the ordained ministries.

33. In preparation for responsible leadership in ordained ministry, the diocesan bishop or major superior is to see to it that the formation of all students in the seminary provides for their service to the disabled community, and for their possible ministry to or with persons with disabilities. Formation personnel should consult with parents, psychologists, religious educators, and other experts in the adaptation of programs for ministerial formation.

## **Marriage**

34. By the sacrament of marriage, Christians signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church. They help each other to attain holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children (*Rite of Marriage*, n. 1).

35. All persons not prohibited by law can contract marriage (Canon 1058).

36. The local ordinary should make the necessary provisions to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in marriage preparation programs. Through this preparation all couples may become predisposed toward holiness and to the duties of their new state. In developing diocesan policies, the local ordinary should consult with men and women of proven experience and skill in understanding the emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological

needs of persons with disabilities (Canons 1063, n. 2 and 1064). The inclusion of persons with disabilities in sponsoring couple programs is an especially effective way of supporting both the needs and the gifts of couples preparing for marriage.

37. For matrimonial consent to be valid, it is necessary that the contracting parties possess a sufficient use of reason; that they be free of any grave lack of discretion affecting their judgment about the rights and duties to which they are committing themselves; and that they be capable of assuming the essential obligations of the married state (Canon 1095). It is also necessary that the parties understand that marriage is a permanent union and is ordered to the good of the spouses, and the procreation and education of children (Canon 1096). Pastors and other clergy are to decide cases on an individual basis and in light of pastoral judgment based upon consultation with diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, and canonical, medical, and other experts. Medical and canonical opinions should be sought in determining the presence of any impediments to marriage. It should be noted, however, that paraplegia in itself does not always imply impotence, nor the permanence of such a condition, and it is not in itself an impediment. In case of doubt with regard to impotence, marriage may not be impeded (Canon 1084, sect. 2).

38. Catholics who are deaf are to be offered the opportunity to express their matrimonial consent in sign language, if sign language is their primary means of communication (Canon 1104, sect. 2). Marriage may also be contracted through a sign language interpreter whose trustworthiness has been certified by the pastor (Canon 1106).

39. Pastoral care for married persons extends throughout the married couples' lives. By their care and example, the entire ecclesial community bears witness to the fact that the matrimonial state may be maintained in a Christian spirit and make progress toward perfection. Special care is to be taken to include parishioners with disabilities in parish programs aimed at assisting and nourishing married couples in leading holier and fuller lives within their families (Canon 1063, n.4).