



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Dr. Nancy Thompson
319-270-6923; nthompson@ncpd.org

Autism Awareness in Parishes and Dioceses

March 1, 2013, Washington, D.C....April is Autism Awareness Month. The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) calls on parishes and dioceses to use this month to emphasize awareness of those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in your parish or diocese and to welcome them into the life of the Church. The NCPD website www.ncpd.org has resources for ministry and for this observation, including Prayers of the Faithful and a bulletin announcement for parishes. The NCPD Autism Task Force (Task Force) joins with other ministries across our nation to support efforts of dioceses and parishes in their ministry to and with people with autism and their families.

ASD remains the fastest growing significant disability in the U.S., with as many as 1 in every 88 children now identified with this disorder, making it an increasingly pressing need that ministry be available. Catholic parishes are seeing this number reflected in those seeking religious education and sacramental preparation. Pastoral and catechetical staff can find support and resources for their specialized needs to serve parishioners with ASD and their families at www.ncpd.org. The list of these resources will continue to grow in 2013 through the work of the Task Force. New website video resources and an app to prepare those with ASD and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) for Mass, Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation will be launched in November at our national disability ministry conference *Partnership 2013: Where Faith and Disability Meet* in Houston, TX, Nov. 1-3. A day-long gathering on ministry for those with autism will be hosted by the ATF Nov. 1 in Houston. NCPD convened the first meeting of the Task Force in November, 2010. It is co-chaired by Dr. Mary Beth Walsh, Adjunct Professor, Caldwell College, NJ, and Charleen Katra, MS, Associate Director, Continuing Christian Education, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, TX. They and five others with expertise in ASD are working collaboratively on five action item areas in 2013 for which they were commissioned by the NCPD Board of Directors. The Task Force includes leaders in ministry, catechesis, app development and autism from across the country, three of whom are parents of children with ASD. It is staffed by Dr. Nancy Thompson, NCPD Director of Programs and Diocesan Relations.

Dr. Thompson explains, "We can take advantage of the heightened national awareness for autism that is generated through Autism Awareness Month (April) and World Autism Awareness Day (April 2) to highlight ministry for and with those with ASD and their families. The public statistics and predictions challenge us to ask how we are serving this large population in our parishes and dioceses. NCPD's 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. Those teachings apply to people with ASD as well as all other disabling conditions."

In the 1995 USCCB **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. Both parishes and families have indicated a strong desire to enrich the lives of their Catholic community by making awareness of Autism spectrum disorder a priority during April and with ongoing ministry efforts. 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.”

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