

Symposium Celebrates Gifts of Persons with Disabilities

By Jen Reed

The Catholic Witness

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The message proclaimed at the Diocese of Harrisburg's recent Symposium on Disabilities Ministry rang loud and clear: People with disabilities bring many gifts and are witnesses of hope for all.

From its morning liturgy and keynote presentation to its workshops and general atmosphere of camaraderie and togetherness, the Oct. 18 symposium celebrated the gifts that persons with disabilities bring to the Church and offered practical information on how to welcome and include them into the life of the Church.

"In God's Image: Disabilities Ministry and Catholic Social Thought" was an effort of the Diocesan Commission on Catholic Social Doctrine. It drew hundreds of clergy, religious and laity – advocates and disabled among them – to the Cardinal Keeler Center in Harrisburg to witness to the Church as one flock.

Keynote speaker Dr. Dennis McNulty, Director of Disability Services for Catholic Charities Health and Human Services in the Diocese of Cleveland, offered a presentation that highlighted the *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities*, issued in 1978. He also noted the importance of applying the principles of Catholic social teaching to disabilities ministry, something that the bishops did in their pastoral statement.

Dr. McNulty remarked that many social justice issues presented in the statement are as true today as they were 30 years ago. One of the most prevalent issues is prejudice against people with disabilities.

Advocacy on behalf of persons with disabilities is necessary to combat those prejudices, some of which are evidenced in the promotion of abortion and euthanasia of those who are disabled, he said.

In the Diocese of Harrisburg, the Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities has established a parish advocacy program, in which people at the parish level work to help the parish invite and include people with disabilities, and to advocate for and with them.

"People who are seen as different and whose lives are viewed as less valuable will suffer greatly in our current culture of death that acts as if it is better to be dead than disabled," Dr. McNulty cautioned as he expressed the value of parish advocates.

Celebrating Differences

In their pastoral statement, the Bishops call upon the faithful to recognize our oneness with those who have disabilities, and to celebrate our differences as well.

Quoting the statement, Dr. McNulty said, "What individuals with disabilities need, first of all, is acceptance in this difference that can neither be denied nor overlooked."

"Accepting the difference means accepting the unique personhood made in the image of God," he said. "It is in this realization of 'different but the same' that we discover the talent each person brings into the Church. People with disabilities bring a different perspective to God's love and what it means to be a human being.

"One of the greatest blessings churches have experienced in the last 30 years is the realization of how much is gained by having the talents of persons with disabilities present in their community," Dr. McNulty continued. "Their presence, their involvement, their talents, their ministries have helped the Church discover a deeper understanding of the will of God and the multiple dimensions of human potential and talent."

Dr. McNulty remarked that integrating people with disabilities into the life of the Church requires different approaches from one parish to another. He encouraged parishes to focus on people – not programs – and to be welcoming communities.

“We need to reach out to families. Our ministries need to make them feel that they are accepted and part of our Catholic community,” he said. “To do this, we must listen to them, welcome them and include them in parish life.”

“The pastoral calls for parishes to prepare for the integration of persons with disabilities by creating an attitude of welcome, an attitude based on knowledge, careful reflection and prayer,” Dr. McNulty remarked. “When a parish prepares to welcome, the successes have been great.”

One Flock, One Shepherd

The symposium was a living illustration of a fundamental message in the Bishops’ statement: “There can be no separate Church for people with disabilities. We are one flock that serves a single shepherd.”

Workshop presenters included Janice Benton, Executive Director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, who spoke on disabilities in parish life; and Barbara Lampe, Executive Director of the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry, who addressed inclusion in liturgy and worship. Other workshops focused on disabilities in regard to spirituality, religious education and sacramental preparation, parish advocacy, deaf ministry, involving youth in parish outreach, the Hispanic culture and L’Arche and Faith & Light.

The day’s shining example of the Church as one flock with one shepherd was witnessed in the liturgy, celebrated by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades, who was joined by several priest concelebrants. A number of persons with disabilities served in various ways during the Mass. Among them was Hillary McFadden from Holy Family Parish, who read the text in Braille.

In his homily, Bishop Rhoades spoke of the hope that people with disabilities bring to the Church.

“In all of our parishes, institutions and communities, it is imperative that we recognize the gifts and talents of all,” he said. “The witness of faith, hope and love of our disabled parishioners who can use their gifts and talents in myriad ways in service of Christ and the Church is a tremendous sign of hope for others.”

The bishop pointed to the Church’s celebration of October as Respect Life Month, and of its recognition of life as a gift from God.

“We believe that God’s unconditional love does indeed bathe every individual and points to a meaning and purpose for all human life, including life which is marked by special challenges, by pain and suffering, or by one disability or another,” he said.

“It is the Lord who points the way for us, the way of hope. Through his cross, Jesus indeed draws us into his saving love,” he remarked. “I believe our brothers and sisters with disabilities can teach us so much about this truth we profess. They can be and are bearers of hope for us all by their perseverance in hope.

“As St. Paul was able to persevere, even when he experienced many trials and setbacks,” Bishop Rhoades said, “so can we. Why? Because the Lord stands by us and gives us strength.”

(For information on disabilities ministry in the Diocese of Harrisburg, visit www.hbgdiocese.org and click on the Special Ministries link, or contact 717-657-4804 or vduncan@hbgdiocese.org.)