

Service makes everyone feel loved

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A woman with cerebral palsy carried a statue of the baby Jesus in her lap as she was pushed in her wheelchair. Some 20 others, a parade of blind, deaf and severely mentally and physically disabled individuals, stood ahead and behind her bearing gifts in the offertory procession.

Saturday, for the 20th year, in a biblical tableau stretching back 2,000 years, the disabled and their loved ones gathered from throughout the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland for a special Christmas service.

"Our Journey to Bethlehem," begun as a small celebration to give isolated families and the disabled in group homes and developmental centers their own Christmas, now packs hundreds into the OLA/St. Joseph Center on West 14th Street in Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood.

It is a place where people so hurting they need to cry out frequently during the service will never be asked to leave. A place where a woman with cerebral palsy, her face almost frozen in a gaping smile, will be hugged repeatedly. And a place where her sibling can share a joyful time with a sister severely disabled from birth.

"It's such a welcoming feeling here. You just belong. You just feel the love and the warmth," said Joan Kosiewicz of Seven Hills, standing over the wheelchair of her sister, Carol Oden, 49. "Everybody's equal here. You feel God's warmth and love, and you see everybody loves everybody."

And no one is left out.

On Saturday, in a gym turned makeshift sanctuary, the readers, the liturgical dancers, the eucharistic ministers, the people bringing up the offertory gifts, almost all had disabilities that may have caused them to read a little slower or be more limited in their movements than others.

But you fill up a room with people who have learned to accept each other for who they are, and those differences do not seem to matter much anymore, participants said.

All that people see are the talents of individuals, said Dennis McNulty, program administrator of Catholic Charities Disability Services.

"This is where I get in touch with God's grace," he said. "This is Christmas."

For the disabled, it is a special gathering.

"It's more than just a service. It's the feeling that you feel from people, the feeling that you think everybody is your friend," said Jennie Weyburne, 85, a blind woman from Cleveland.

"I feel Jesus inside of me," said Daniel McCafferty, 53, one of the liturgical dancers. "We're all of us Jesus."

"Our Journey to Bethlehem" is not a by-the-numbers service. The Mass doesn't start on time, and not everyone sits and stands in unison. Worshipers get the up-tempo, not the mournful, version of "Amazing Grace" and people boom out, rather than mumble, "Merry Christmas" in response to the celebrant's prompt.

Yet this raucous, disheveled and ultimately joyous service cannot help but bring to life images from Christian Scriptures filled with accounts of Jesus spending time with the blind and the deaf and the mentally disabled, participants said.

"It makes me feel how Christ must have felt when he came to serve mankind, to see the weak, the troubled and the hurting and the only thing you can give them is love," Auxiliary Bishop Roger Gries said afterward. "And they return it a hundredfold."

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