



A Personal Narrative

By Sr. M. Johanna Paruch, FSGM

This article is the first of a series of articles on catechesis for and with persons who have disabilities.

We live in a time that has much to offer to the education of people who may need some accommodation in coming to know and follow Jesus. New technologies and means of communication constantly arise, which are put to the service of this noble aim. Unfortunately, our time has also seen abortion, euthanasia, and medical rationing threaten the lives of those whom society may deem “unnecessary,” with people often committing these atrocities in the name of “mercy.”

In early Greece and Rome, those considered “defective” were killed outright or left to die. In the Gospels we see that if a person was disabled in some way, people thought that it was because of that person’s sins or the sins of the parents. Jesus overturned this idea and instead cured the blind, the deaf, and those suffering from other disabilities. One only needs to read Mark’s Gospel to see Jesus cure people with these ailments and even raise the dead.¹ Matthew records Jesus’ mission entrusted to the disciples, highlighting the fact that even they would be involved in healing: “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...” (Mt 10:8).

In this introductory article, I would like to establish the context for the series by drawing from my own experience with persons with disabilities. I beg your patience as I describe the experiences that will inform how I treat the issues raised in this series.

Childhood

I am the third of seventeen grandchildren born to Mickey and Flora MacNeil. The first two grandchildren, my cousins Michael and Ellen, were born with significant cognitive and developmental disabilities. One summer, Ellen and I were at our Nana’s and I was both overprotective and patronizing of her. Feeling very good about myself, I bragged to Nana about what good care I had given to Ellen. My very wise and loving grandmother had no use for that kind of attitude. I can still hear her tell me in no uncertain terms that Ellen was a person in her own right and did not need my condescending attitude and that I was to love her the way I loved all my siblings and cousins. Thank you, Nana.

My family is large and diverse, spread over Canada and the United States. We loved when we could all be together. One of my favorite visitors was my mom’s cousin Herb and his wife Mary. They were deaf, and while they spoke and read lips, I was fascinated by the speed and beauty of their sign language; and I loved them.

When I was in high school, I was a Girl Guide (Scout) and was introduced to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) and the Canadian Club for the Blind. I spent much time as a volunteer in whatever way they could use me and made strong friendships.

Education

It was because of these experiences that I felt that I should spend my life in some way working with people who were disabled. God had other plans, and yet he was to use these experiences in the future. I entered the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George in 1973 and was sent to university to earn a degree in Theology and Elementary Education. In 1975, Public Law 94-142 was passed. It “guaranteed a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability.” This law had a dramatic, positive impact on millions of children with disabilities in every state and each local community across the country.² All those studying education were required to take a course on “special ed” as it was called, in order to welcome those students were would be “mainstreamed” into our schools.

Professional Life

My first year teaching was the United Nations International Year for the Disabled, and I used various means to have my seventh graders understand and welcome those with differing abilities. The next year I “taught across the curriculum” and had my students do research, write papers, and write letters to organizations of people with disabilities to learn about their lives. And all of this was before the Internet!

One of my students wrote to the American Association of the Deaf Blind. She received a very generous response from their president, and so did I. He told me he had never met a classroom teacher who took such care to teach students about a group of people in the United States who were discriminated against and ignored. Soon after that I was off to Gallaudet University (the only university in the world for the deaf) to serve for a week as a fingerspelling

interpreter for a person who was both deaf and blind. It was then that God showed me that he wanted me to use my earlier experiences with my cousins and the CNIB. Several people begged me to learn sign language and devote myself to the pastoral care of the deaf, the blind, and the deaf-blind; and the Lord moved my heart and the hearts of my superiors to learn sign language and in some way work in this area. So I did. No matter what my main apostolates were, all dealing with catechesis at some level, I have always been able to devote some of my time to working with those people who need my skills.

In 1999, I came to Franciscan University to teach catechetics. Due to the demands on my time, I had little opportunity to work directly with anyone with a disability. However, I was able to begin teaching a sign language class. In my catechetical methodology courses, I realized that most of my students had no idea how to teach anyone with a disability. So from one class within this course dedicated to the topic there grew what we now call the "Blessed Margaret Castello Day: Catechesis for Persons with Disabilities." Bl. Margaret was a Third Order Dominican who suffered from several debilitating disabilities and yet brought many people to the Lord.

I do believe that all my previous experiences prepared me to help my students become convicted that everyone has the right to receive the fullness of the faith, and that

those people who have disabilities also have the right and duty to serve in the work of an evangelizing catechesis. A final note: in spite of my experiences with Ellen, I was always uncomfortable with those who were developmentally delayed, or "mentally retarded" as we used to say. I was invited by a former student to visit a L'Arche home. These homes were founded by Jean Vanier where both those with and without developmental disabilities could live together in a Christ-centered atmosphere. I hesitated but felt I had to go, and as I stepped over the threshold, I was cured of all anxiety.

In the articles that follow in future issues of *The Catechetical Review*, we will explore ideas that will help create a more inclusive catechesis for anyone who has special needs. These articles will be centered in the Church's teaching regarding catechesis for all God's children.

Blessed Margaret Castello, pray for us.

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Notes

- 1 Mark 1:40-45; 2:1-12; 5:21-43; 7:31-37; 8:22-25.
- 2 The four purposes of the law articulated a compelling national mission to improve access to education for children with disabilities. Changes implicit in the law included efforts to (a) improve how children with disabilities were identified and educated, (b) evaluate the success of these efforts, and (c) provide due process protections for children and families. In addition, the law authorized financial incentives to enable states and localities to comply with P.L. 94-142. http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ose/idea35/history/index_pg10.html.

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