

Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities

A Framework of Access and Inclusion A Statement of the U.S. Bishops

Twenty years ago we issued a statement calling for inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church and community. In 1982 the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities was established to promote this ministry. And in 1995 we strengthened our commitment with passage of the *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*.

This moral framework is based upon Catholic documents and serves as a guide for contemplation and action. We hope that the reaffirmation of the following principles will assist the faithful in bringing the principles of justice and inclusion to the many new and evolving challenges confronted by persons with disabilities today.

1. We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.
2. Each person is created in God's image, yet there are variations in individual abilities. Positive recognition of these differences discourages discrimination and enhances the unity of the Body of Christ.
3. Our defense of life and rejection of the culture of death requires that we acknowledge the dignity and positive contributions of our brothers and sisters with disabilities. We unequivocally oppose negative attitudes toward disability which often lead to abortion, medical rationing, and euthanasia.
4. Defense of the right to life implies the defense of all other rights which enable the individual with the disability to achieve the fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable. These include the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, and in health care, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities and services.
5. Parish liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.
6. Since the parish is the door to participation in the Christian experience, it is the responsibility of both pastors and laity to assure that those doors are always open. Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty.

7. We must recognize and appreciate the contribution persons with disabilities can make to the Church's spiritual life, and encourage them to do the Lord's work in the world according to their God-given talents and capacity.
8. We welcome qualified individuals with disabilities to ordination, to consecrated life, and to full-time, professional service in the Church.
9. Often families are not prepared for the birth of a child with a disability or the development of impairments. Our pastoral response is to become informed about disabilities and to offer ongoing support to the family and welcome to the child.
10. Evangelization efforts are most effective when promoted by diocesan staff and parish committees which include persons with disabilities. Where no such evangelization efforts exist, we urge that they be developed.

We join the Holy Father in calling for actions which "ensure that the power of salvation may be shared by all" (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 16). Furthermore, we encourage all Catholics to study the original U.S. bishops and Vatican documents from which these principles were drawn.