

MINISTRY TO THE HANDICAPPED:

CARE OF THE LESS PRIVILEGED AND ABANDONED PERSONS IN THE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Disability is a state of possessing certain human qualities that limit the effective functioning of persons in their daily lives. Disabilities can be a natural endowment which an individual cannot control although it can also develop through accidents or human carelessness. Notwithstanding its origin, disabilities can present themselves in various and subtle forms that elude ministers with abilities who focus only on physical limitations. The limitations of people with handicapping situations do not constitute them any less a human. Handicapped persons are persons that possess all human qualities and should be given all the human rights conferred to persons with abilities. However, to minister to the less cognitive and physically privileged persons is to extend the saving mission of our Lord Jesus Christ in our time. In the disabled persons, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the saint of our time saw the image of Christ and abandoned everything to minister to them in the slums of India. Generally, man is inherently disabled by sin. Sin is the greatest obstacle that inhibits all created beings from reaching their goal of eternal bliss. Hence, the ministers of Sacraments care for the souls handicapped by sin. Therefore, the caregiver, either a layperson or a cleric is to recognize his or her role as a privileged person who the Lord Jesus has chosen to participate in the saving mission.

INTRODUCTION

The handicapped child or people are always in the developmental process. They trustfully and perpetually rely on God and man for their existence and sustenance. Their life and situation, like the lives of people with abilities, are not as a matter of choice. Disability is their special endowment not of their choice but the will of he who thus created them. Not all disabilities originated from nature; any mishap can cause a person to develop a handicapped situation. An accident can make a person develop physical or cognitive disabilities. This paper focuses mainly on disability as a natural endowment through which God's handiwork is manifested. At creation, God gave man the singular gift which differentiates man from other animals. This endowment is man's likeness to God, the ability to know and choose between good and evil; and the "Will or liberty" too. To choose between good and evil gives man primacy over other created beings on earth and makes him their master and lord, (Gen. 1: 27 - 35).^[1] According to Pope Leo XIII,

¹ God created man in his image and likeness

liberty,^[2] is the highest natural endowments, being the portion only of intellectual or rational natures, confers on man this dignity - that he is "in the hand of his counsel" and has power over his actions, (Leo xiii, *Libertas*, June 20, 1888) ^[3]. However, among those born of women, are some who do not possess the fullness of this liberty. While some can walk and talk or possess other qualities that could be used involuntarily or voluntarily and at will, their cognitive abilities and will are compromised, they cannot distinguish between good and evil, safety or danger. They are completely dependent on thoughts and some activities of human survival.

DEFINITION OF DISABILITY

The ministry rendered to the less privileged persons, young and old, male and female, poor or rich, is the extension of the mission of Christ who served the poor, the needy and handicapped. He stated that whatever his followers did not do to one of the least of these they did not do it for him, (Matt. 25: 45). It is imperative to create awareness of certain endowments that, constitute a disability or disabilities in persons – children or adults. Such knowledge will enable persons with abilities to discover inabilities in others and so accept them in their limitations or minister to them in charity. The knowledge that an individual can literarily perform certain actions might not disqualify them from being disabled. A person can walk, run, dance, and indeed perform many physical activities but lacks mental abilities. Another person can have mental or cognitive abilities but lacks physical debility; while some other person can have both cognitive and physical capabilities or disabilities. A person whose skills are insufficient to perform either the activities of daily life and reasoning has a form of disability. Hence the Merriam dictionary defines disability as a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions ^[4]. The subtlety of disabilities cannot only manifest itself in morbidity but can mask itself in extrovertist and introvertist behaviors. Hence, special care is needed to discern that some colleagues, employees, and associates whose behaviors are unbearable or whose performances fall short of the desired expectation are warring within themselves with issues beyond their control as some impairments are very elusive.

In as much as this paper focuses on physical and cognitive disabilities, it is necessary for able-bodied persons to understand that there are spiritual dimensions of disabilities that are incomparable with physical or cognitive disabilities. These types of disabilities are more dangerous than a physical handicap. As some physical and cognitive disabilities are an inherent gift from God, so does spiritual disability become an integral part of man due to the original fall of our first parents. The Catechism of the Catholic Church number 1707-1708 states that *man, enticed by the evil one abused his freedom at the very beginning of history. ^[5] He succumbed to temptation and*

² Pope Leo xiii states that that man's gift of liberty makes him responsible for his actions

³ The ability to choose between good and evil is the highest gift of God to man

⁴ Disability limits human optimal functioning

⁵ Man enticed by evil

did what was evil. He still desires the good, but his nature bears the wound of original sin. Each day, a man that is conscious of the intrinsic inclination to sin struggles to return to the Savior who had paid the debt of sin and death through his supreme sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. This utmost sacrifice provides the grace of cleansing, purification, and reinstatement of the life of grace. By his Passion, Christ delivered us from Satan and from sin and merited for us the new life in the Holy Spirit. His grace restores what sin had damaged in us. The physically and cognitively disabled persons cannot ask to be freed from their endowed inabilities. Such people are created so that God's creative work might be made manifest since neither they nor their parents are responsible for their state of life, (Jn. 9: 1-3). When persons who have spiritual deformities blindly refused to ask to be delivered, they remain in perpetual disabilities from sin.

THE ELUSIVENESS OF HUMAN IMPAIRMENT

In a classroom of students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities, mild to moderate autistic impairment, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders, among them were literary perfect students since they looked normal and spoke eloquently. The teacher, at first instance, wondered why such good-looking students with great verbal fluency would be among his students. He enthusiastically started his teaching with the energy of a teacher whose intention was to deliver his best to his students. In another classroom were students with notable disabilities and in the next class were students with total care. After two weeks into the term, the teacher that wondered why such students should be placed in his class began to experience the reason for the placement. He realized the subtlety of disabilities and changed his instructional approach. In another setting, the teacher had two excellent students among his normal students. These two students could be termed perfectionists who would not accommodate the academic mistakes of their peers. Often people tend to conclude that such a person does not put in his best or that the other is a genius with a difficult personality. The same could be true of our aged parents, parishioners, parish councilors, etc. that are experiencing impairments in behavior, reasoning, or speech. Do the consecrated persons recognize the situation and seek positive intervention for such persons?

Mayo Clinic explains that mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is the stage between the expected cognitive decline of normal aging and the more serious decline of dementia. It can involve problems with memory, language, thinking, and judgment that are greater than normal age-related changes ^[6]. Sometimes children are born with underdeveloped or overdeveloped physical and cognitive skills. The overdeveloped skills might sometimes become a disability that manifests itself in obsession. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) as a common, chronic disorder in

⁶ Disability could be natural or age-related

which a person has uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts and behaviors that he or she feels the urge to repeat over and over in response to the preoccupation. [7]

The obsession over certain behaviors can as well interfere with the performance of duty and might deter cordial interpersonal relationships as much as would cognitive and severe physical impairments. In the ministries of the clergy and religious, are there times for reflection, questions, and consultation on why such a person exhibits certain behaviors. Do consecrated persons examine their actions to determine if such actions fall short of the ideal? Or do consecrated persons find a short-cut-solution by discharging the employee of his duties and sending a student on myriads of suspension and or total expulsion? Compulsive obsession and mild cognitive disabilities are impairments masked by appearances or over-strictness. How can consecrated persons intervene?

PERSONS WITH SEVERE HANDICAP

At a glance, Chinedu and Ikechukwu's disabilities are seen. Chinedu pushes with his nethermost and Ikechukwu hobbles and salivates all over himself. Both have cognitive, speech and orthopedic impairments but hear even the sound of a pin. They depend on others for their sustenance and activities of daily upkeep and survival. Will these incapacitating situations make them less human? Are persons with debilitating conditions included when the Lord of the universe said as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me, (Matt. 25:45). [8] On the wholeness of the human person the Holy Catholic Church teaches that man is an embodiment of the divine image that shines forth in the communion of persons; he is created in the likeness of the union of the divine persons, and from conception man is given both spiritual and immortal soul that is destined for eternal bliss (CCC:1702 -1703). [9] Are persons with disabilities or multiple disabilities deprived of these gifts of the communion of persons with an immortal soul and eternal bliss or beatific vision? The committee on the preparation of the 2000 Jubilee noted that the ministry to the handicapped is the Church's effort to search and find the crucial point at which the human person is fully himself. The committee noted that disability is not a punishment but a challenging meeting point for normality and stereotype. As complete persons, the handicapped deserve all the rights of every others person and discriminating against them in any form is a violation of their human rights, (The Preparatory Committee Rome 17 July 2000). [10] Hence, the Church, like her founder, values and preserves the human persons in any stage and state (conception, healthy, sickness, or disabled), they found themselves. Acknowledging that whatever

⁷ An uncontrollable behavior that is manifested in obsession

⁸ The disabled persons are not less than their non-disabled peers.

⁹ People with disability are also heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

¹⁰ Discrimination against handicapped Persons violets their human rights.

that is done to the least of these is done to Christ animates the care and support for the disadvantaged, the disabled, the handicapped should animate the zeal of those ministering to them.

MINISTRY TO THE HANDICAPPED

In so far as it is within the scope of the charism of an institute, the work that a consecrated person does is a ministry. As a professor in theology, education, health, and or medicine ministers to the elite, so does the school teacher, home health nurse, beside caregiver, workers in the homes of the sick and disabled minister. Each in his or her capacity should minister to achieve, with divine mercy, his or her eternal salvation. In ministering to the disabled, who do we behold? Whose face does the minister look upon? Mother Teresa of Calcutta did not behold the countenance of the noble, the wealthy, or the rich. Rather she saw her ministry and the services of her nuns, as written in her biography, as ministering to Jesus, whom they encounter as suffering in the poor, especially those who are dying alone or who are abandoned. In his words, the Pope of our time, John Paul II, exults the faithful to accept every life as a gift that should be defended, protected from conception to natural death. He specifically mentioned the aged and handicapped and urges the faithful to stand up against their degradation and all attempts to promote assisted suicide and euthanasia since every life is a gift from God our Creator; and that we must give an account to God of how we use it, either for good or evil, (A Few Lessons for Living. John Paul II). [11] Therefore, consecrated persons have moral, religious, and spiritual obligations to minister to and uphold the dignity of the vulnerable and protect their lives.

THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING ON DISABILITY

Discrimination against peoples with disabilities was not strange to the Church as it was not strange to the society in general. The Church, aware of the inhumane treatment the disabled receive even from the clerics issued the statement that not only condemned the act but elaborates its adverse effect on the people of God that are less privileged. The catechism of the Catholic Church states that the dignity of the human whose defense and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator, and to whom the men and women at every moment in history are strictly and responsibly indebted is at stake, (CCC:1930). Discriminating against disabled persons is depriving them of social justice and disrespecting their transcendent dignity. Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a God's creature, (CCC:1931). The Church should play a major role to remind people of goodwill about the rights of persons with disabilities and to distinguish them from unwarranted or false claims.

¹¹ The faithful are encouraged to protect the lives of the vulnerable.

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In teaching the scripture, tradition, and morals, the Catholic Church understands and teaches that human life created by God in any form is equal and inherently sacred. As every human life is equal and inherently sacred, human life in all its form deserves the bedrock of a just society which is dignity and respect. Based on the perspective of the dignity and sacredness of human life, the Church criticizes systems, values, and structures that exclude, discriminate, hide or otherwise diminish people living with disabilities; it offends their human dignity and it is also a symptom and symbol of an unjust society, (Catholic Social Teaching and Living with Disability). [¹²]

An objective society stands in solidarity with persons with disabilities, offers them the same opportunities and respects that are accorded with their non-disabled counterparts a just society also allows them to make their own decisions in relation to their own needs, relationships and does not unduly delegate their decision-making power to higher authorities and governing bodies, (Catholic social teaching). The Church, therefore calls her members and especially people of consecration to be defenders of persons that live with debilitating circumstances. People consecrated to the service of the Lord are constantly reminded that God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, (1 Cor 1:27), *any help in whatever positive means rendered to the infirm is a giant step toward doing it to Christ whose face is reflected in the faces of those weak, marginalized, and disabled* [¹³]. In the words of his holiness Pope Francis, the way we experience illness and disability is an index of the love we are ready to offer. It will be a contradiction for the followers of Christ to seek help and quick recovery without empathizing with the perpetually invalid, terminally sick, and the marginalized of the society. The beauty of the Church and every society is clearly visible when all its members are all incorporated and cared for without discrimination. In his parable of the banquet, the king invited the nobles. His banquet hall was empty. He sent and invited all, the invalid, disabled, and marginalized of the society. His banquet hall was full. None was rejected except the one who did not wear his wedding dress, (Matt. 22: 9-13, Lk. 15: 21-25), [¹⁴].

The local Church in every corner of the universe is to develop the appropriate technique of inclusion needed for people with disabilities who share the same faith with them. The Australian Catholic Church Bishops conference, Commission for Pastoral Life under the umbrella of the Australian Catholic Disability Council advises bishops commission on the strategies and projects that can promote the participation of peoples with disabilities in their churches. Hence

¹² Exclusion of the handicapped Persons is a symbol of an unjust society.

¹³ the face of Christ is reflected on the faces of the disabled and vulnerable.

¹⁴ Wedding garment was the criteria for participating in the banquet of the Lord

the Australian Church is focusing on the ability and not the disability of its members. Bishop Terry Brady, (2015) said, ‘Parish communities need every person to be part of the worshipping body. A Parish is not complete or whole unless it includes, nurtures, and rejoices in each of its members, ^[15]. Parishes are called to be communities that gladly and authentically welcome people with disabilities and their families to a life of the Church (*Catholic Social Teaching and Living with Disability*).

All are invited to be neighbors to each other, actively serving and anticipating each other’s needs. Anticipation and delivery of services become more crucial when the disadvantaged persons are involved. (CCC, 1929-1932). ^[16] Pope Francis attests that people with disabilities or disabilities bring diversity and richness to the Body of Christ, the Church. He states that people with the five complete senses are not better than people with limited abilities because the quest for the kingdom of heaven is not measured by the possession of complete senses but by faith in and love of God. ^[17] He exhorts pastors of souls to diversify the proper means of catechizing the deaf and mute so that they will be active recipients of the sacraments in the Church. Although the care of persons with debilitating abilities should fall on the shoulders of all, ministry to the handicapped is a vocation within a vocation. All consecrated persons who responded to the charism(s) of their founder do not perform the mission with equal diligence to all the aspects of their ministry. Some may be perfect teachers, nurses, evangelizers, caregivers. People whose vocation is the care of the disabled persons should embrace it with the utmost love and dignity since in these handicapped persons they daily encounter the face of the Lord.

Benefits of Ministry to the Disabled

Ministry to handicapped and disabled persons are diverse. Different people or communities of consecrated persons participate in some aspect of the care. People who are engaged in the care of the less privileged in whatever form are participating in the saving mission of Christ. Founders of different Religious Communities pick up one aspect of the care of the needy as the focal point of their ministry to participate in the saving mission of Christ. Founders, aware that their apostolate should be rooted in and animated by Christ, encourage their members to perform their ministry with charity and love. The love of Christ that animates the ministry of consecrated persons differentiates them from the work of philanthropists. The benefits of ministry to the handicapped and vulnerable is the promise of Christ “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as

¹⁵ A parish that excludes the handicapped is incomplete.

¹⁶ All are exhorted to participate in the service to the disadvantaged of the society

¹⁷ Quest for the kingdom of heaven is not measured by physical and cognitive completeness.

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you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew, 25:40). Anyone that argues that care of the poor and the needy started before the advent of Christ should reflect that the prophets spoke the word of God who is ‘Made Man’ -incarnate of the Virgin Mary. Beginning from the Old Testament, Christ started to minister to his wondering people in the desert with the Pillar of cloud and fire in the day and night until they were free from Pharaoh’s clutches. He healed the sick, cleansed lepers, forgives sins of both the living and dead before he comes as the Messiah in the flesh. These are manifested when, through the ministry of Moses he cured those sick of the poisonous venoms of the fiery serpent in the desert, (Num. 21: 6-8), cleansed Miriam of her leprous condition through his intercession of Moses, (Num 12:1-16), and prayed for the forgiveness of the fallen Israelite soldiers (2 Mac. 12: 39-43). [¹⁸]

The New Testament is inundated with the ministry of mercy and compassion of our Divine Redeemer Jesus Christ. Each of us possesses multiple disabilities due to the “First Fall” and uncontrollable urge to turn from the narrow gate that leads to life... , (Mtt.7: 13-14). Indeed, the greatest handicap is the sinful endowment man inherited from his first parents. [¹⁹] Sin deprives the human person of the grace of God and drowns him into pride and arrogance. Pride and arrogance elevate man beyond his status and leads him to discriminate against the disabled. In humility, a man should understand that his ministry in the Body of Christ is a participation of the ministry of Christ. Christ feeds his wondering people with Manna in the Desert and with fish and bread, thousands of people having the leftover that outnumbered the quantity that was multiplied. He raised the dead, cured the sick, cast out demons, sets the possessed free of their enslavement, consoled the widow and brought to life her only son processed for entombment. Above all, he died the ignominious death of the cross that paid the utmost price of all the disabilities of mankind. If in the ministry to the handicapped the minister does not see Christ, the service is erroneous. Mother Theresa of Calcutta ministered to the Poorest of the Poor, consoled the lonely, sat beside the agonizing, brought hope to the hopeless to satiate the love of Christ who thirsts on the Cross. Material benefits derived from the care of the world’s vulnerable persons cannot be compared with the spiritual gain of consoling Christ in the disabled, the poor, the sick, the abandoned and neglected in a world that is often hostile to the less privileged.

¹⁸ Religious communities are to embrace their charism of both spiritual and corporal works

¹⁹ Man’s greatest handicap is sin.

CONCLUSION

Persons that serve the vulnerable in any form or circumstance should understand that their service as a participation in the mission of Christ who said that the harvest is plenty, but the laborers are few; and added that requests should be made to his Father, the Lord of the harvest to send laborers for the harvest, (Lk 10:2, Mtt.9:37-38). Ministry to the less privileged and vulnerable of the society is to behold and serve the Master whose face is reflected in their faces. The Church is called to be active ministers to disabled and vulnerable persons in the society and the Church. In ministering to the handicapped, the Church imitates her Master and Lord that gave sight to the blind, bandaged the wounds of the victim of brigands and paid his hospital bills, heald the paralytic, gave hope to the widow that lost her only son, and atoned for the debilitating nature of humanity.

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