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Alert the community before sprinkling rites are celebrated so that those who find it overstimulating can step out for a moment.

# Sensory Friendly Masses Unify the Body of Christ

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*I sat at Mass, admiring the family two pews ahead of me. They were a sweet couple with an adorable little boy, about age five, who showed signs of a developmental disability. I was thrilled to see a new young family at church. The child was very active. He wandered back and forth in the pew and played with the worship aids, and he was especially excited by the music during the Gospel acclamation. Immediately after the proclamation of the Gospel, he began to sing the alphabet enthusiastically. I could tell that his parents were growing uncomfortable, but as a parent of four children, I empathized with them. I planned to introduce myself during the sign of peace and give them words of encouragement, but that opportunity never came. Our parish is known for*

*its welcoming nature, so I was sure that the family would feel a sense of belonging; however, by the exchange of the sign of peace, they were nowhere to be seen.*

This situation is all too common in parish communities. Perhaps this couple had experienced criticism at a previous church, maybe they grew up with a parish culture that frowned upon any additional noise during Mass, or they may have been exhausted from trying to appease an active and vocal child during the liturgy. In any case, they were gone, and I never saw them again. As a parent of neurodiverse children, I too have endured the stigma associated with invisible disability; however, it took the departure of this family for me to realize that something needed to change.

When parishes fail to welcome persons with disabilities, a portion of the parish is lost—sometimes permanently. Families desire that their members experience the fullness of faith. Still, when the sacraments are not accessible, families often seek out other Christian communities or forsake their faith altogether. The entire Body of Christ suffers when parts of the Body are excluded. In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis states:

“Many persons with disabilities ‘feel that they exist without belonging and without participating.’ Much still prevents them from being fully enfranchised. Our concern should be not only to care for them but to ensure their ‘active participation in the civil and ecclesial community. That is a demanding and even tiring process, yet one that will gradually contribute to the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person.’”<sup>1</sup>

In celebrating the paschal mystery, the liturgy unites members of the Body of Christ through sacramental symbols, regardless of an individual’s abilities. The liturgy provides a genuine encounter with Christ that supersedes articulated experience. This encounter conveys grace, drawing us closer to Christ and one another. Since the liturgy is the source and summit of our Christian lives, accessibility to the Mass needs to be a priority in parishes aiming to foster a culture of belonging. While there are many ways to create an accessible liturgical environment, the sensory friendly Mass provides an opportunity that both builds community and evangelizes. This Mass conveys to persons with disabilities and their families that they are wanted and expected at Mass.

### WHAT IS SENSORY FRIENDLY MASS?

A sensory friendly Mass provides an environment for worship with fewer stimulations, allowing people with sensory processing needs to participate in the liturgy comfortably. (Among those with sensory processing needs may be people with autism, intellectual/developmental differences, and dementia.) Considering the liturgy through the lens of a person who struggles with sensory sensitivities, a number of factors can be seen as overstimulating, including crowding, loud and dynamic music, a buzzing sound system, flickering fluorescent lights, a sudden ringing of bells, strong scents, changing postures, and a surprise sprinkling of holy water. The combination of these factors may lead to a feeling of being overwhelmed for those who experience their senses in a magnified way. When celebrated well, the sensory friendly Mass reduces some of the more overwhelming stimuli and provides opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate in a developmentally appropriate way throughout the liturgy. The *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* advocates for participation for all members of the parish, stating: “Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active, and conscious participation, according to their capacity.”<sup>2</sup>

The sensory friendly Mass includes modifications, such as lower lights, softer music, more concise and literal homilies, and

visual aids. These liturgies are intended to be welcoming to people with neurodiversity; therefore, participants are encouraged to come as they are, move around if needed, wear noise-canceling headphones, and bring any alternative seating or soothing items to enhance participation in the Mass. A parish may modify the environment of a regularly scheduled Sunday Mass for it to be “sensory friendly” or to offer a separate sensory friendly liturgy specifically designed for persons with disabilities and their families. Both options have benefits; implementation is most effective when the community that is impacted is involved in the planning process.



A low-tone resonator bell can be a less stimulating alternative to bells in liturgy.

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Providing a sensory friendly Mass during a regularly scheduled Sunday liturgy opens the door for the Body of Christ to be united. Not only are the needs of persons with disabilities met, but the accommodations are often appealing to families with young children. These Masses foster a culture of belonging in which the community can learn from one another and grow in understanding of the person of Christ. A community of belonging also recognizes the value of the many gifts that persons with disabilities possess and prioritizes the full integration of all people. As the *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities* states, “We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.”<sup>3</sup> To keep the Body of Christ together in its entirety, it is important to accommodate persons with disabilities in

their sacramental life. Circumstances exist, however, in which a person cannot celebrate the liturgy in a large group setting. For these situations, offering a sensory friendly Mass geared explicitly toward persons with disabilities and their families would be a preferred option. These specialized liturgies are often smaller and tend to be a better fit for individuals who are especially sensitive to crowds, require more movement, or have frequent vocalizations.

Whether a parish chooses to offer a sensory friendly Mass as part of the normal Sunday schedule or as a separate liturgy, consistency and availability should be prioritized. “Full accessibility should be the goal for every parish, and these adaptations are to be an ordinary part of the liturgical life of the parish,”<sup>4</sup> the Guidelines states. If the aim is to create a space where accommodation is a part of the liturgical life of our community, sensory friendly Mass should never be a one-time event. Offering a regularly scheduled sensory friendly Mass communicates that people with disabilities are valued members of the Body of Christ. This message should be articulated intentionally.



Natural light is preferable to fluorescent lighting during sensory friendly Mass.

Some have questioned the necessity of the descriptor “sensory friendly” for the Mass. From the perspective of evangelization, articulating the modifications communicates their existence to people with disabilities and their families. According to a study published in the *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, “approximately 33% (32.3%) of respondents indicated they changed their places of worship because their children were not included or welcomed.”<sup>25</sup> If parishes aim to convey that persons with disabilities are wanted and expected at the liturgy, communicating what is being done differently is essential. Such communication is occurring in shopping centers, libraries, theaters, and other parts of the community that seek out people with heightened sensory sensitivity. When parishes use language such as “sensory friendly,” people with sensory differences will feel valued.

## COMBATING STIGMA

*One of my favorite conversations after a sensory friendly Mass began with this statement: “I didn’t see anyone with disabilities here today. Maybe we don’t actually need to do this.” I responded, “The people we are trying to reach often have invisible disabilities. You might not notice unless you spend some time getting to know them.”*

The misconception that disabilities are noticeable is far more prevalent than one might think. Autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and many other intellectual and developmental disabilities are invisible. Unless familiar with some of the traits associated with various diagnoses, an individual might attribute some behavior to poor parental discipline. A child’s cries might stem from an inability to process stimuli and communicate frustration. Negative projections directed at people with disabilities and their families contribute to a paralyzing stigma that wounds the Body of Christ. The sensory friendly Mass helps eliminate the stigma that persons with disabilities and their families face and aids in unifying the Body of Christ.

As part of best practices for implementing sensory friendly Mass in parishes, the planning team and pastor should spend at least a month preparing the assembly for the changes in the environment and introducing them to the need for a sensory

friendly liturgy. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states, “Before proceeding to new adaptations, especially profound ones, great care shall be taken to promote due instruction of the clergy and the faithful in a wise and orderly manner, so as to take advantage of the faculties already foreseen and to apply fully the pastoral norms in keeping with the spirit of the celebration.”<sup>26</sup> The adaptations to the environment for the sensory friendly Mass are not profound, but still the assembly should be educated to understand the reasons for the adaptations and how they would benefit people in the parish. Preparation for a sensory friendly Mass includes cultivating a spirit of belonging and awareness so that the parishioners understand the needs of people with disabilities. Attention to the ongoing education of the worshipping assembly helps eliminate stigma and ensures that the Church can truly become a place where all are comfortable worshipping God.

Prior to initiating sensory friendly Masses in the parish, pastoral staff will want to explore the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ documents *The Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities, Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, and other resources on the National Catholic Partnership on Disability website (ncpd.org). Additionally, staff should learn more about autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, ADHD, and sensory processing disorders. It would also be helpful to research local organizations that support persons with disabilities and their families, such as the local chapter of the Autism Society. Familiarity with the experiences and realities of persons with disabilities and their families can provide a better perspective and lead to more intentional ministry.

Fostering a culture of belonging is not only the responsibility of the pastor and staff.

“The creation of a fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical accommodation to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners toward persons with disabilities. All faith community members have a role to play in the invitation, welcome, and inclusion of people with disabilities. Pastoral ministers are encouraged to foster attitudes and a parish culture, and to develop informational materials, aimed at forming a community of believers known for its joyful inclusion of all of God’s people around the table of the Lord.”<sup>27</sup>

The entire Body of Christ has an obligation to its members. The parish cannot function well without seeking to understand the inner workings of one another. A plethora of educational resources revolving around the sensory friendly Mass is available through the National Catholic Partnership on Disability and other participating dioceses. These resources include brochures, bulletin inserts, and sample bulletin/pulpit announcements that could support this initial phase of awareness and preparation. A well-prepared community that knows what to expect during the liturgy will be united in spirit during Mass.

Another means of eliminating stigma for persons with disabilities during the liturgy is to set clear expectations before Mass begins. At the beginning of each sensory friendly Mass, a

greeter should make an announcement that clearly articulates the changes people might notice and what behaviors are deemed acceptable. A sample announcement might look like:

Welcome to sensory friendly Mass. This liturgy is intended to welcome all people to the Supper of the Lord.

Some changes you might notice during this Mass are lower lights, softer music, visual aids, and a more literal homily, but the most significant difference is that this is a stigma-free environment. That means that every person in this church is welcome to enter into the Mass as they are.

If you need to get up and move around, that is fine. Vocalizations are welcome, but if you need to take a break, we have a sensory room available just down the hall. There are signs available to direct you to this space.

We also have noise-canceling headphones and adaptive worship aids available in the gathering space. If you need any other accommodations or assistance, please reach out to one of our ushers.

Finally, if you would prefer to receive a low-gluten host, they will be available during Communion from the minister in front of the ambo.

Thank you, and we are so glad to have you at this liturgy.

When expectations are clear before Mass begins, the entire assembly is made aware that people with disabilities are welcome without judgment.

## ENVIRONMENTAL AND LITURGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

*After my parish's first sensory friendly Mass, a woman who had arrived late approached me, saying, "Mass was really relaxing today. I don't know what was different, but it just felt more peaceful."*

Having entered late, this parishioner had not heard the announcement regarding the sensory friendly Mass, but she noticed something different about the celebration. With environmental accommodations such as lower lights and softer music, along with liturgical adjustments such as more concise and literal homilies and the omission of incense, the sacred liturgy remained unchanged, but "felt more peaceful" due to the reduction of stimuli. The following environmental and liturgical considerations are suggestions for a Mass to be considered sensory friendly. Parishes will implement these based on the needs of the people present and the pastor's preferences.

- **Lighting:** Adjust the lighting to find the best balance for the space. Natural light is the ideal solution, but if the sanctuary is too dark, be sure that the lighting is bright enough for people to see the words in the hymnals and worship aids but dim enough to reduce visual stimuli. Avoid fluorescent lights if at all possible. If your sanctuary has no other option, consider



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The use of incense should be avoided during sensory friendly Masses.

covering fluorescent lights to reduce the brightness. If possible, varied lighting levels around the space could better meet the needs of the assembly.

- **Sound:** To avoid feedback, check your sound system, and practice with cantors and readers. A hot microphone can be overstimulating. Ensure that those using the microphones are close enough to be heard clearly. Correct any audible background buzzing, and adjust sound levels appropriately for the space.
- **Physical Space:** Inventory the gathering space, hallways, bathrooms, and sanctuary for any barriers preventing maneuvering by someone with mobility limitations. Identify pews near an outlet in case a parishioner's medical device requires electricity. Find a quiet room away from the sanctuary that can be used for respite. Sometimes a person needs to step away to regulate their senses; creating a safe space for a break is a necessary accommodation. Consider providing alternative seating options, such as wobble seats or rocking chairs.
- **Special Liturgical Celebrations:** Be mindful of additional rites that might occur during the liturgy, such as sprinkling rites during the Easter season. Any change in the order of Mass should be noted in the opening announcement. Changes in routine can be challenging for people who struggle with executive function. Consideration should be given to omitting the sprinkling rite during a sensory friendly Mass since the onslaught of water might incur a negative response for some. If a sprinkling rite is part of the liturgy, inform the assembly in advance so people with an aversion to water can step out for a moment.

- Music: Select easy-to-follow and more commonly known songs and Mass settings. Acoustic instruments are less stimulating and may be better than the organ. A partially closed piano will lower the sound; electric drums increase the ability to control the volume. A cantor with a mid to low vocal range is preferable at the sensory friendly Mass; high notes are especially overstimulating. Prepare your choir/cantor regarding accommodations and sensitivities to stimuli among members of the assembly.

- Children’s Lectionary: When possible, the children’s lectionary might be a better choice for the readings at Mass, especially when the sensory friendly Mass is specifically for persons with disabilities and their families. According to the GIRM, “Language should be used that corresponds to the capacity for understanding of the faithful and is suitable for public proclamation while maintaining those characteristics that are proper to the different ways of speaking used in the biblical books.”<sup>8</sup> This leaves room for the use of the children’s lectionary in situations in which it is beneficial for the comprehension of those present. While a children’s lectionary should not be used at every sensory friendly Mass, there might be occasions where its use is appropriate.

- Homily: A brief, literal homily will better serve people with autism and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Visual aids also assist with comprehension.

- Eucharist: The need for gluten-free or low-gluten hosts is more pronounced at Masses with people with disabilities. Persons with sensory sensitivities can also struggle with texture and swallowing. Extraordinary ministers of holy Communion should be trained to provide a smaller piece of a host if indicated. A person who struggles with swallowing might not be able to consume an entire host.

- Omitting stimuli: Incense used at some liturgies permeates a sense of reverence for many. Similarly, the ringing of bells during the Eucharistic Prayer signifies the importance of the words of the institution narrative. The smell of incense and the sounds of bells, however, can be overwhelming to people with heightened sensory sensitivity. It is recommended to omit incense at sensory friendly Masses. For the ringing of bells during the Eucharistic Prayer, a low-tone resonator bell would be preferable to the higher-toned bell sets.

- Visual Aids: Offering adaptive worship aids or a picture chart of the order of Mass provides people with disabilities assistance with following the liturgy. These resources would benefit children as well as people with disabilities.

Finally, people with disabilities should be among the parish’s liturgical ministers. Invite people with disabilities to be formed as greeters, ushers, and other liturgical ministers. Forming people with disabilities to use their gifts in ministries is a testament to a community that prioritizes welcome and belonging. The US bishops’ *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities* states:

“If persons with disabilities are to become equal partners in the Christian community, injustices must be eliminated and ignorance and apathy replaced by increased sensitivity and warm acceptance . . . Disabled individuals bring with them a special insight into the meaning of life, for they live—more than the rest of us, perhaps—in the shadow of the cross. And out of their experience, they forge virtues such as courage, patience, perseverance, compassion, and sensitivity that should serve as an inspiration to all Christians.”<sup>9</sup>

The voices of persons with disabilities and their families should always be part of the conversation when seeking to make the liturgy universally accessible. With diverse people serving at Mass, a community can create more opportunities for accommodation and meaningful participation for all. ♦

#### Notes

1. Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 98.
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, 3.
3. National Catholic Partnership on Disability, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities*, 1.
4. USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, 3.
5. Melinda Jones Ault et al., “Factors Associated with Participation in Faith Communities for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 17, no. 2 (April 2013): 184–211.
6. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 396.
7. USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, 7.
8. GIRM, 391.
9. USCCB, *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities*, 4.

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#### At [www.PastoralLiturgy.org](http://www.PastoralLiturgy.org)

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL:  
<http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/SensoryFriendlyMass.pdf>.