



# Nurturing the Liturgical Roles of the Whole Assembly

Cutaway pews provide room for a person in a wheelchair to be seated comfortably among the congregation.

## Ellen McBride

At 4:30 PM on a Saturday, the liturgy coordinators at St. Vincent Ferrer Parish in Vallejo, California, check the schedule of liturgical ministers for the 5 PM Mass. They see that Eddie is to be the sacristan and cross bearer; Danny Eyheralde, the reader; and a family has been asked to bring up the bread and wine at the Presentation of the Gifts. They realize that Eddie has a tremor and cannot carry the tray with cups and patens from the side credence table to the altar; that Danny walks with an awkward gait and has developmental disabilities; and that a member of the family who will bring up the gifts uses a wheelchair.

With simple adaptations, all of these liturgical ministers fulfill their roles. Before Mass, the credence table is moved, so that Eddie can bring up the cups one by one, instead of lifting a tray with four cups. Danny chooses to join the ministers at the altar instead of walking up the aisle during the Entrance Procession. He proclaims the Second Reading, and afterwards, the liturgy coordinator moves the Lectionary, since it is too heavy for Danny to lift. As Danny returns to his seat in the assembly, he walks past Rev. Jeff Henry, who asks him to stop so he does not

trip on an untied shoelace. The priest stoops down, ties the shoe, and proceeds to the ambo to proclaim the Gospel. At the Presentation of the Gifts, the father carries the flagon of wine with his outside hand, the mother holds the paten with bread in her outside hand, and they each use their inside hand to push the wheelchair of their son, who holds the collection basket in his lap. Almost without thinking about it, the parish has welcomed, supported, and integrated individuals with disabilities into the parish community and into their roles as liturgical ministers.

## MANDATE FOR FULL, ACTIVE PARTICIPATION FOR ALL

In the *Pastoral Liturgy*<sup>®</sup> article “Encouraging the Assembly to Full Participation” (November/December 2013), Thomas Scirghi, sj, notes the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*’s focus on participation. He states that “the reference to ‘participation’ has been called the refrain of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), occurring at least fifteen times throughout the document.” CSL states that the Church desires that “all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical



Photo © John Zich

member is prevented from active participation, the church community is incomplete. We call upon church leadership throughout the country to encourage conversion of mind and heart, so that all persons with disabilities may be invited to worship and to every level of service as full members of the Body of Christ.”

The US Bishops’ 1995 *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* continued the advocacy for those with disabilities. Within the *Guidelines* are seven principles: by reason of their Baptism, all Catholics are equal in the sight of God; that Catholics have the right to participation in sacraments; sacramental celebrations should be accessible and provide for full, active, and conscious participation; that efforts need to be made to determine the presence of those with disabilities; that pastors must be as inclusive as possible “in providing evangelization, catechetical formation and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities”; that full access reaches beyond the physical accommodations; and that dioceses are to establish policies that “respect the procedural and substantive rights of all involved.”

### DIOCESES’ RESPOND TO THE CALL FOR INCLUSION

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, of the Archdiocese of Chicago, sought to touch the hearts of all in his archdiocese with his 1985 All Saints’ Day letter that advocated inclusive ministry that welcomed persons with developmental disabilities into the liturgical life of the Church. That same day he wrote a letter to persons with disabilities that stated, “I want you to know you have a place at the table of the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> These letters were followed by publication of *Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons: Pastoral Guidelines for the Archdiocese of Chicago, 1985*. The *Pastoral Guidelines* declared that all are “to be welcomed as full members of the parish, and in particular, the liturgical assembly. . . . If each person does not have a place before the table of the Word of God and the table of the Bread of God, where is there a place?”<sup>22</sup>

Then in 1991, Bishop Thomas Daily, of the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, wrote *Come to Me: The Church’s Response to Disabled Persons*. In that statement, he said that “to exclude anyone from ‘full, conscious and active participation’ in the life of the Church, especially in its liturgy, is to deny him/her *full access* to communion with God in the Church. If people are not welcomed to the Sacraments, they are not welcomed to the main source of life in the Church, the celebration in our midst of the Mystery of Christ in the Eucharist and in other Sacraments.”<sup>23</sup> Bernardin and Daily were forerunners in the advocacy of inclusive active participation in liturgy for persons with disabilities.

In the decades since Bernardin’s and Daily’s statements, dioceses have reached out to welcome and invite persons with disabilities to active participation in liturgy. The Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania, sponsors an annual Diocesan Disability Inclusion Awareness Sunday to heighten awareness of the gifts persons with disabilities can offer to the life of the parish. Sample bulletin announcements and prayers of intercession are provided to parishes to help them prepare for Awareness Sunday. Then on a given Sunday, the diocese encourages every parish to recognize the gifts of persons with disabilities by offering

celebrations,” with participation being the right and duty of all in the assembly by reason of their Baptism (14). The article continues, stating that “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else,” clarifying that no one is to be excluded from participation in the liturgy. Parishes must consider, then, whether and how they call individuals with disabilities to worship.

As pointed out in the *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (1978, revised 1989, 2001), practicing inclusion may call for a reexamining of attitudes toward those with disabilities. The statement affirmed that “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. The leaders and the general membership of the Church must educate themselves to appreciate fully the contribution persons with disabilities can make to the Church’s spiritual life” (13).

Reinforcing that document, the bishops stated in their *1988 Resolution on the Tenth Anniversary of the Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities*, “We proclaim that if any



Photo © John Zich

A wheelchair that can be kept in the church will be welcome to people who need help walking a distance.

a chance to participate in a special way during liturgy. In April 2014, Archbishop Charles Chaput presided at the annual Mass for Persons with Disabilities in Philadelphia, recognizing the needs and gifts of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities while facilitating their participation in the life of the Church. Men and women with developmental disabilities provided music and participated as altar servers with assistance from seminarians. The Sacramento and Cleveland Dioceses coordinate annual Advent/Christmas celebrations, inviting persons with disabilities to pray, celebrate, and reenact the Nativity scene.

Monthly in the Dioceses of Honolulu and Newark, adapted liturgies are celebrated for and with families with sons and daughters of unique abilities and intellectual disabilities. In February 2014 at the Hawaiian One Ohana worship, Bishop Larry Silva blessed Darrin Ai of Maui as the community congratulated him for his dedication and commitment to ministry as an altar server. Both Hawaii and Newark provide persons with cognitive disabilities booklets for following the Mass. The Newark twenty-six page booklet, *We Go to Mass* has color photos and is formatted so that the pages can be laminated and placed in a folder for use week after week.

Newark's "Attends Mass Program" for individuals with autism and their parents provides an opportunity for persons with autism to develop skills to participate at Mass with the

family. After observing the person attending Mass with the parents, a trained mentor works with the individual for short times at Mass, staying in church as long as the child is able to be attentive that day. Over time, the individual develops the skills to participate as a member of the assembly at Mass.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh sponsors both special liturgies and a parish advocate program. Ann Scanlon, who completed the parish advocate program in 1988 as part of the first class offered by the diocesan Department for People with Disabilities, wrote in an article in 2013 for her diocese:

The goals of this ministry are to help people challenged with a disability to participate fully in the church and its liturgy, and to educate others about the life and needs of people with disabilities. . . . I have worked with the pastoral staff and families to create awareness as well as explore options for accessibility and inclusion. I work with children and people of all ages, so that ALL can learn and feel welcome in God's house. I find the most blessings in the St. Scholastica annual Mass for people with disabilities. . . . All of the participants—singers, lectors, extraordinary ministers of holy Communion and offertory procession participants, etc.—have a disability of one kind or another. Several times we have even had a vision guide dog in the sanctuary. The Diocesan Deaf Choir has been part of this event every year. . . . Being a parish advocate has given me the self-confidence to go beyond my own parish with the message of inclusion. I've given talks to educate people about how it is to live your life from a wheelchair; spoken in elementary schools, religious education, adult formation and youth ministry programs. . . . My ministry as an advocate has become a regular part of my daily life.

Advocates that are part of the Parish Advocate Network in the Diocese of Richmond act on behalf of people with disabilities to ensure that all are invited to share parish life. Buffalo New York's advocate program sponsors an annual day-long training and commissioning Mass for its advocates.

### INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION AT THE LOCAL PARISH

Parishes provide support to persons with disabilities in diverse ways, sometimes through a homily that allows the congregation another perspective. During a homily in June 2014, Deacon Tom Lambert spoke of his family's experience with mental illness, emphasizing that Christ calls us to compassion. He told the congregation that Christ's Apostles witnessed his compassion. "They saw Jesus welcome the stranger—people who looked and acted different than they did, and they saw Jesus bring joy to the outcast, the marginalized, the ones society didn't want around," said Lambert, the cofounder of the Chicago Archdiocese's Commission on Mental Illness and cochair of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability's Council on Mental Illness. He explained in his homily that people need a supportive faith community that ministers to their faith in God and called upon the community to take that step, "listening without judging, caring without condition."<sup>24</sup>

It is important for liturgical ministers to come to their ministry with a sense of openness, hospitality, and welcome, knowing that all are to participate fully in liturgy. When ministers are welcoming, persons with disabilities are more likely to approach them to seek to participate in specific liturgical ministries.

Still, the unfamiliar is often uncomfortable, so a hospitality minister might feel unsure about approaching a person using a wheelchair or cane. As Barbara Guenther states in her article, “Forming Liturgical Ministers in Hospitality” (July/August 2014 *Pastoral Liturgy*®), hospitality requires reaching beyond ourselves. “Whether a parish names it hospitality, welcome or evangelization, reaching out to others requires each person’s willingness to step out of their comfort zone, look up, and look another person in the eye.” Just as with others, the hospitality minister should introduce himself or herself and welcome the individual, as well as family and friends who are present, and converse about parish activities, the weather, and other everyday topics. If an individual is slow to move, hard to understand, or appears anxious, patience should be exercised.

It should never be assumed that a person needs or wants assistance; instead an inquiry should be made as to whether help is desired. The person who is blind or visually impaired could be asked if assistance, such as holding an arm for guidance to a pew, is desired. When approaching a step or the pew, it is helpful to inform the individual who is visually impaired. When walking away, tell the person that you are doing so. Should an individual not understand what is said, it is helpful to change phrasing. Lack of understanding could be due to a hearing loss, mental disability, or a language barrier. Adjusting to the situation, attempt another way to communicate, possibly using simpler words.

As a parish learns how to care for all parishioners, situations that may have seemed trying become easier. When Michael, a teenage boy with autism began a tantrum during the Eucharistic Prayer at St. Vincent Ferrer Parish one Sunday, Rev. Cletus Karakkat compassionately walked away from the altar to the family and stayed with them for a few minutes. Once Michael was calmer, the priest returned to the altar, asked the community to keep Michael and his family in prayer, and the Mass continued. Michael and his family remained, participating with the community as members of the assembly. Several months later, an overwhelming sense of inclusivity, love, and compassion overcame me, as I watched how Rev. Cletus and the liturgical ministers welcomed and assisted Justin, a young man with Down Syndrome, as he came forward to have his feet washed during the liturgy on Holy Thursday. Justin’s joy at being greeted and assisted in taking off his shoes, and watching as his feet were washed was beautiful. Another young man who uses a wheelchair and has a cognitive disability was excited when asked to bring forth the gifts of bread and wine during the Presentation of Gifts. These types of experiences already occur in many parishes and will expand as other parishes welcome all to join in liturgical ministries.

Sometimes small adaptations facilitate an individual’s participation. At a parish I visited, I observed that many older adults using canes or walkers lost their balance in their last few steps toward the Communion minister. I suggested positioning the minister one foot closer to the communicants so that those who



Photo © John Zich

The presence of a sign language interpreter shows the value the parish places on each person’s full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy.

found it necessary could lean against the front pew for balance as they received Communion. That simple solution improved the independence and access for some of the assembly.

When a parish appears to be welcoming, individuals with disabilities may be more likely to seek to fill liturgical roles. Danny had been a lifelong member of his parish when he asked the liturgy director if he could become a reader. This outgoing young man, who was well known in the parish, participated in the parish program for readers. When scheduled to read, Danny’s preparations include listening to the reading at the US Bishops’ website, paying attention especially to pronunciation and phrasing. His mother, who also is a reader, makes a large print copy of the reading, from which they practice together. Before Mass, Danny places his large print copy at the ambo. He checks in with the other reader to coordinate the process. Danny is clear about any adaptations he needs. He reads well, but he has difficulty with walking and holding objects; therefore, the other reader carries the Book of the Gospels during the Entrance Procession. Since Danny cannot lift the Lectionary off the ambo at the conclusion of his reading, the liturgy coordinator typically does so. With those minor adaptations, Danny can be the active participant he desires to be, a liturgical minister proclaiming the



Photo © John Zich

A railing can assist liturgical ministers as they enter the sanctuary.

Word of God. Danny is part of other liturgical ministries also. He has perfect musical pitch and plays the piano and organ by ear, so he often plays the organ during Mass.

In a neighboring parish, St. Dominic, in Benicia, California, Shawn Swienton, a teenager who has Down syndrome, ministers as an altar server. His parents tell of how, as a youngster, Shawn went to church early with his father, Dan Swienton, who was the parish leader for training altar servers. One Sunday, as Dan prayed the Rosary before Mass, young Shawn walked into the sacristy and put on an alb. At that Mass, Shawn's father provided the child with on-the-job training. Soon, Shawn joined the parish-wide altar server training. Sometimes he needs cues from other servers or the priest celebrant, but as his father says, that is pretty common with most young servers. Serving is not Shawn's only liturgical ministry; he also is part of the parish youth choir.

## WHAT NOW?

Dioceses and parishes have taken steps to engage all of the faithful in full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy. Danny's and Shawn's parishes journey with them as they take on their roles as liturgical ministers. All of us, too, are on a journey as we examine how we promote the full, conscious, and active participation of all the faithful in liturgical celebrations. As Guenther states in her article on hospitality, there will never be a time when the community says, "We got it." Instead, we will find that we can always improve and learn. Rev. Kevin Huber, pastor at Queen of All Saints Parish, Michigan City, Indiana, has shared in a letter to parishioners his discovery of the need for continued understanding of others' needs. Queen of All Saints Parish had gone to great lengths to be hospitable to all. Bathrooms were renovated for accessibility, pews were padded to add comfort for older adults, the sound system was updated, and hearing assistants were added for the hearing impaired. Still, Rev. Huber heard

from a man, whose family had been founding members of the parish, that physical barriers at the church caused him to change parishes. This man told the surprised priest that cars blocked sidewalk ramps and that the pews do not allow space for wheelchairs. As a result, the man had begun attending Mass in a parish where access to the church is not impeded. In his letter to his parishioners, Rev. Huber said he was pained that the man felt unwelcome at Queen of All Saints, saddened that no one had mentioned the obstacles in the past, and embarrassed that he had not noticed them himself. Rev. Huber responded with action. In his letter he reminded all that "increased awareness of the challenges that other men and women face is required . . . to see the world through their eyes or at least be open to the struggles and inconveniences that other men and women experience, looking beyond our personal comfort and convenience." Rev. Huber took the next step, made additional renovations, and reminded his parishioners that identifying opportunities to include members and visitors is essential to the life of the parish. His actions exemplify implementing the mandate for inclusive ministry. The challenge for all of us is to do the same—to move forward, step out of our comfort zones, and find opportunities to promote inclusion for all as active participants in the liturgy. ♦

## Notes

1. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "Letter of 11-1-85 to People with Developmental Disabilities," reprinted in *Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1985)
2. *Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1985), 1–8.
3. Thomas Daily, *Come to Me: The Church's Response to Disabled Persons* (Brooklyn, NY: Catholic Charities Office for Disabled Persons, 1992), 1–2.
4. <http://www.ncpd.org/sites/default/files/2014-02%20St%20Marys.pdf>

ELLEN MCBRIDE, MSW, has been working with persons who have developmental disabilities for more than thirty years. Her master's degree in social work is from the University of Southern California and her dual master's degrees in theological studies and ministry for a multicultural church are from the Franciscan School of Theology, Berkeley, California. Her article "Languishing for Wholeness: The Catholic Church and Persons with Disabilities," was published in *Liturgy: The Journal of the Liturgical Conference* (Philadelphia) in February 2008.

## 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/resources/NurturingTheLiturgicalRoles.pdf>