

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the life of the Church, even by passive omission, is to deny the reality of that community. Accessibility involves far more than physical alterations to parish buildings. Realistic provision must be made for person with disabilities to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments of reconciliation, confirmation and anointing of the sick. Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, November 1978; revised 1989

I General Principles:

- By reason of their baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling. #1
- Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community¹. Ministers are not to refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, who are properly disposed, and who are not prohibited by law from receiving them². #2

II Particular Sacraments:

Baptism

- Because it is the sacrament of universal salvation, baptism is to be made available to all who freely ask for it, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving it. Baptism may be deferred only when there is no reason for hoping that the person will be brought up in the Catholic religion⁴. Disability, of itself, is never a reason for deferring baptism. Persons who lack the use of reason are to be baptized provided at least one parent or guardian consents to it⁵. #9

Confirmation

- All baptized, unconfirmed Catholics who possess the use of reason may receive the sacrament of confirmation if they are suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew their baptismal promises¹³. Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents or guardian to receive the sacrament of confirmation at the appropriate time. #16

Eucharist

- Parents, those who take the place of parents, and pastors are to see to it that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and nourished by the Eucharist as early as possible. Pastors are to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not

reached the use of reason or whom they judge are not sufficiently disposed¹⁷. It is important to note, however, that the criterion for reception of Holy Communion is the same for person with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely, that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally. Pastors are encouraged to consult with parents, those who take the place of parents, diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, psychologists, religious educators, and other experts in making their judgment. If it is determined that a parishioner who is disabled is not ready to receive the sacrament, great care is to be taken in explaining the reason for this decision. Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament. The existence of a disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from receiving the Eucharist. #20

Reconciliation

- Only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing a serious sin. Nevertheless, even young children and persons with mental disabilities often are conscious of committing acts that are sinful to some degree and may experience a sense of guilt and sorrow. As long as the individual is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution. Those with profound mental disabilities, who cannot experience even minimal contrition, may be invited to participate in penitential services with the rest of the community to the extent of their ability. #23
- In the case of individuals with poor communication skills, sorrow for sin is to be accepted even if this repentance is expressed through some gesture rather than verbally. In posing questions and in the assignment of penances the confessor is to proceed with prudence and discretion, mindful that he is at once judge and healer, minister of justice as well as of mercy²¹. #25

Anointing of the Sick

- The anointing of the sick may be conferred if the recipient has sufficient use of reason to be strengthened by the sacrament or if the sick person has lost the use of reason and would have asked for the sacrament while in control of his or her faculties²⁵. Persons with disabilities may at times be served best through inclusion in communal celebrations of the sacrament of anointing.²⁷ #29

Holy Orders

- The existence of a physical disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from holy orders. However, candidates for ordination must possess the necessary spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological qualities and abilities to fulfill the ministerial functions of the order they receive.²⁹ The proper bishop or competent major superior makes the judgment that candidates are suited for ministry of the Church.³⁰ Cases are to be decided on an

individual basis and in light of pastoral judgment and the opinions of diocesan personnel and other experts involved with disability issues. #31

Marriage

- For matrimonial consent to be valid, it is necessary that the contracting parties possess a sufficient use of reason; that they be free of any grave lack of discretion affecting that judgment about the rights and duties of which they are committing themselves; and that they be capable of assuming the essential obligations of the married state.³⁴ It is also necessary that the parties understand that marriage is a permanent union and is ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children.³⁵ Pastors and other clergy are to decide cases on the individual basis and in light of pastoral judgment based upon consultation with diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, and canonical, medical, and other experts. Medical and canonical opinions should be sought in determining the presence of any impediments to marriage. It should be noted, however, that paraplegia in itself does not always imply impotence, or the permanence of such a condition, and it is not in itself an impediment. In case of doubt with regard to impotence, marriage may not be impeded.³⁶ #37

1 Cf. canon 213.

2 Cf. canon 843, §1.

4 Canon 868, § 1, no. 2.

5 Canon 868, §1, no. 1, and 852

13 Canon 889

17 Canon 914

21 Canons 978, §1; 979; 981.

25 *Rite of Anointing*, nos. 12, 14

27 Cf. canon 1002.

29 Canons 1029 and 1041, no. 1

30 Canons 241, §1; 1025, §2; 1051, no. 1

34 Canon 1095.

35 Canon 1096.

36 Canon 1084, §2.