

Accessible Worship

The Catholic bishops of the United States affirmed in 1995 that “Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community.” Surveys have reported that one person in five has a significant disability, and one family in three is impacted by a disability.

Many parishes are working to make liturgy accessible for people with disabilities by providing or adapting a physical environment so that everyone in the community may gather for worship and participate, as the bishops said, “according to their capacity.” These aspects of the community’s worship space include access ramps for people in wheelchairs, pew cutouts, appropriate lighting for people with limited vision, enhanced hearing systems, large-print and Braille worship resources, and many other factors. Additional attention should be paid to making the space accessible for people with disabilities who offer themselves in service as cantors, choir members, lectors, ushers, ministers of Communion, deacons, and priests.



Many dedicated people are working to provide access for other believers with disabilities, but we sometimes think of these believers as people for whom we do something, and we forget that they are also people who have gifts to offer. People with disabilities who have enhanced Christian worship include musicians such as Notker the Stammerer, who helped to create the liturgical poetic form known as the “sequence” in the ninth century; Hermann the Cripple, who composed offices for saints days, built musical instruments, and wrote a book about musical theory in the eleventh century; Francesco Landini, a blind organist and organ builder in the fourteenth century; Maria Theresia von Paradis, a blind musician so popular that Mozart, Salieri, and Haydn



Choir photo courtesy of the Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, Massachusetts.

dedicated works to her, who opened a music school for young girls—seeing and visually impaired—in Vienna in the nineteenth century; Ludwig van Beethoven, whose greatest music—including the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Symphony in D Minor (Choral)* were composed after 1820, when he was completely deaf; Fanny Crosby, a blind poet whose hymn texts include the beloved “Blessed Assurance”; and the twentieth century organist and composer Jean Langlais.

When we learn to appreciate the person with a disability for his or her gifts and talents, we become aware of the power of Christ’s love for all of us, and we work more willingly to develop an inclusion plan so that all of God’s children will be welcome at the Lord’s table. Every person with disabilities has the capacity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, to be a living witness to the truth of the Gospel, and to offer the gifts they have been given in service to the Church and those in need.

None of us, as the late Pope John Paul II reminded us during his visit to Australia in 1986, is free from human frailty. So “to speak of disability, handicaps, and illness is to speak of the weakness of our human condition.” Each of us has some disability that makes us rely on others who are “abled” where we are not. All of us, therefore, are called to assist those whose disabilities differ from our own, for only by working together, the Holy Father said, “can the community hope to find solutions worthy of the respect owed to every single person.”

Copyright © 2006 National Association of Pastoral Musicians. This page may be reproduced in its entirety as a bulletin insert by NPM members without further reprint permission. For other uses, contact the NPM editorial office by e-mail: npmedit@npm.org.