

EDUCATION

The Voice of Jesuit Experience on the Significance of Disability

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The Problem

The purpose of this study was to present the voice of Jesuit theologians on the significance of disability within the historical context of Catholic doctrine. The study serves to expand perspective using historical exploration and reflection. The practical application of the study sought to broaden course component within the ethics and disability construct sections of Special Education.

The Process

Five theologians with an expertise in Jesuit theology consented to interview. These participants were chosen because of their active participation in the Catholic faith and their age range. Each theologian answered four open ended question addressing their understanding of the purpose/meaning/significance of disability.

The Context

Old Testament

Within our religious history we can see a fluctuation of acceptance of individuals with disabilities. Within the Old Testament we recognize descriptions of difference. For example, in Exodus 4:10 Moses said to the Lord: *O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.* The Lord replied to Moses: *Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf and mute? Who gives sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?* Here, without benefit of rabbinical interpretation, God creates disability. We go on to visit Moses in Leviticus 20:16 where God directs him to tell Aaron that: *For the generations to come none of your descendants who have a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect is to come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed. No man with a crippled foot or hand. Or who is hunchbacked or dwarf or who has any defect or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles...because of his defect he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar and so desecrate my sanctuary, I am the Lord who makes them holy.* God as presented in the Old Testament rejected those he created who were not physically perfect.

New Testament

The New Testament brings a new Rabbi, Jesus the Christ who speaks as One with God. In Luke 5:22, he heals a man with paralysis and asks: *Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven or to say get up and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins He said to the paralyzed man, I tell you to get up and take your mat and go home.* John 5 describes the healing at the pool near Bethesda where the disabled gathered- the blind, the paralyzed, the lame. Jesus addressed an invalid of 38 years: *Do*

you want to get well? Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me into the pool...Then Jesus said to him-Get up-Pick up your mat and walk. At once the man was cured...The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away in the crowd that was there. Later, Jesus found him at the temple and said to him: See you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.

Further along in Luke 9:37, Jesus removes the evil demons of epilepsy and in Luke 18: 42 restores sight: *Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.* In John 9, the disciples asked Jesus whose sins caused congenital blindness: *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but his happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day we must do the work of Him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work...Having said this he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.* We leave the New Testament with conflicting information and no real answers. Has God changed positions? Are those with physical deformities sinners while those who are blind serve to display the work of God within their lives? Is all of this figurative? Does disability serve God?

An Example of the Early Church

In 1287, in a small town in Florence Italy a child was born to a noble family. The child was hunchbacked, dwarfed, blind, and lame. The family shame was formidable. At the age of 6 the child was mortared into a wall of the Catholic Church where her only contact was with the parish priest. She had a window that allowed her to hear Mass, and a window that brought her necessities. At sixteen she was taken out to a shrine in Castello, Italy for a pilgrimage. When she was not healed, she was abandoned. A beggar endeared to the townspeople of Castello, she was taken in by the Dominican nuns. As a tertiary she visited the sick, comforted the dying, and served the imprisoned. Her work with young children made her a beloved in the community. Margaret of Castello believed that God had made each person in His own image and likeness. Following her death in 1320, 200 miracles have been credited to her intercession. In 1609 she was beatified and is today a patron saint of the disabled. (Retrieved from www.nashvilledominican.org/Charism/Our_Saints/BI_Margaret_of_Castello.htm on February 20, 2008).

Searching for Answers

In 1486, again seeking to understand difference, the Dominicans Henricus Institor (Kramer) and Jacop Sprenger wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487). In the *Malleus* they described children born with what we might now recognize as Down syndrome, Prader Willis syndrome, or a number of medical conditions (i.e. lactose intolerance) as, *Another terrible thing that God permits to happen to men ...when their own children are taken away from women and strange children are put in their place by devils.* (Kramer & Sprenger, transl.1928/1971, p.406) The church referred to these infants as changelings. According to the *Malleus*, there were three sorts of changelings (*Wechselkinder*) – *those that were always ailing and crying and could never have enough milk, the second from artificial insemination of a team of devils, and the third who were actually devils in guise of infants. All were very heavy, ailing, did not grow and never had enough milk.*

They had arrived because of God's divine punishment of their parents for a variety of sins. Some were just witches; others were conceived from the carnal knowledge of an Incubus devil. It was not uncommon for these children to mysteriously vanish into the night.

Within the Last 50 years

For centuries, the church has been instrumental in the care of individuals with disabilities. The religious have founded orphanages, run homes, and fought for the humane care of the individuals with physical and mental disabilities. Lives of service to the poor, homeless, the diseased, lepers fill our history. Catholic schools have educated the blind, the deaf, the mentally retarded and the abandoned. The Catholic Bishops of the United States of America position:

It is not enough to affirm the rights of people with disabilities. We must active work to make them real in the fabric of modern society. Recognizing that individuals with disabilities have a claim to our respect because they are persons, because they share in the one redemption of Christ, and because they contribute to our society by their activity within it, the Church must become an advocate for and with them. It must work to increase public sensitivity towards the needs of people with disabilities and support their rightful demand for justice. Moreover, individuals and organizations at every level within the Church should minister to persons with disabilities by serving their personal and social needs.

Many can function on their own as well as anyone in society. For others, aid would be welcome. All of us can visit persons unable to leave their homes, offer transportation to those who cannot drive, read to those who cannot read, speak out for those who have difficulty pleading their own case. In touching the lives of men, women and children in this way, we come closer to imitating Jesus' own example, which should be always before our eyes (cf. Luke 4:17-19,21). Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities (1978, updated 1989), United Catholic Conference, Inc.

The Outcome

To address the Jesuit experience on the significance of disability five Catholic theologians consented to interview. Each of the five participants is a respected male, Catholic theologian/religious leader who graciously agreed to participate in this theological exploration. Individual participants are coded for the sake of confidentiality as follows:

- Participant 1- Theologian between 70-80 years old
- Participant 2- Theologian between 60-70 years old
- Participant 3- Theologian between 50-60 years old
- Participant 4- Theologian between 40-50 years old
- Participant 5 - Theologian between 30-40 years old

The comparison and thematic discussion centered on four questions:

- What is your understanding of the purpose/meaning/ significance of disability according to the teaching of your religion/community?

- How do you see your (parents and/or grandparents) (practicing members of the religious community) interpreting the position of the church on the birth of a child with a disability?
- How are children with disabilities welcomed into your (religious) community and what kind of support is there for their parents?
- Children with disabilities may have strange sometimes violent behaviors. Does your (religious) community have any answers as to the significance, treatment, or cure for such conditions?

Interviews

What is your understanding of the purpose/meaning/ significance of disability according to the teaching of your religion/community?

Participant 1: Real disability, this is in the gospel- blind man- some say who caused this – **nobody caused it- God did not curse them ; it was not from their parent’s sin** . We do not understand the mystery. Suffering assuredly to the church is a good thing – no pain, no gain, some are strong, some commit suicide – I learned patience from this – patience to suffer.

Participant 2: Diversity – traditionally- will of God since God is all powerful. **Somehow from God either as test or a punishment-** or a way of making us stronger- should be accepted as such. Jesuit -Pierre Teilhard de Chardin explained suffering – world as finite and breaks down -not sent by God’s will but structure of the universe – material things.

Participant 3: **Part of me wants to say manifestation of God’s grace;** sounds negative not to be disabled is a blessing, disability of course is not this. Another way – an opportunity to respond to a disability- finding completion- I never thought of this in terms of religion – more in line with health.

Participant 4: Blind gospel, people asked because of his parents sin or sin in him Jesus replied neither – to show forth the glory of God- the cure- message- invitation for all of us- the label of disability- **we are called to shed our blindness to see God glory shine through in each and every person we encounter-** gifts or talents are all created in image and likeness of God and a revelation of God’s love in our world- opportunity to see the way God sees us; opportunity to bring God love into that person’s life- to see in a different way- to see not just through the eyes but the heart.

Participant 5: **I don’t know purpose- it is not as if God decides that one will have disability another not- I don’t believe God gives disability to an individual.** The church would say that no matter what our challenge in life is - challenge -cross-complaint we can reflect on the suffering of Christ’s life and draw strength from that - just as Christ struggled with his cross we are called to challenge our cross.

How do you see your (parents and/or grandparents) (practicing members of the religious community) interpreting the position of the church on the birth of a child with a disability?

Participant 1: My parents would have thought **it was somebody’s fault – a punishment- or they were a victim- more a victim.**

Participant 2: Traditional notion – **will of God- hide these children, embarrassed, institutionalized them- not true for all people** – trend was to hide just not knowing how to deal- In the Third World-Nicaragua- many parents in poverty, older parents drop off their child at the institution and never visit- abandoned children- it is a financial issue- they run from this. Yet at the same time- there are young people dedicated to caring lovingly for every need of the physically disabled in very poor institutions often without air conditioning, electricity, and financed day to day.

Participant 3: If by that, the option is birth or abortion- my parents would have given birth- child is important no matter what the condition. **Child is God's gift to you- it does not matter what the child was like- that was secondary.** Also blue collar neighborhood so practically speaking- no extraordinary medical services were available.

Participant 4 : In my family tradition, **every child born no matter who they were was a precious gift and deserved to be loved.** My mother and father -they may not have had testing like amniocentesis – they would not have thought of abortion as part of the landscape of options- if you had the were with all you would care- unless they were so disabled you could not care for them- there were some institutionalized- most common disability was Down's – might have had a physical disability such as blindness, deafness, lacking a limb- my mom and dad would have accepted that child.

Participant 5 :I think my parents would see that as - **say God does not give disability** that it is an accident of birth- grandparents probably the same- the language of -it is not the child's fault

How are children with disabilities welcomed into your (religious) community and what kind of support is there for their parents?

Participant 1: They are physical, people, anyway handicapped or deformed- arms, internal, special needs- ordinary ways they would not find helpful- in wheelchairs- example ramps. **I would say since the 60's with Vatican II the church is more sensitive-** lavatories available now provided in all churches – built because of the ADA stuff – hearing aids in the church. Archdioceses orphanage supports education, therapeutic, that kind of thing; Catholic social services – helping physical problems, mental problems. The Society of Jesuits, the one real case -brother: has one arm; Jesuit brother; he produces plays- theater for the disabled and he also worked/s with Iraq veterans.

Participant 2: Historically the men have never been allow to enter the priest hood with a disability – with Canon law kept out of the priesthood or religious life- there are very few. **This is religion's inability to cope with disability.**

Most churches have no access –it is unusual to see a disability in church. At our chapel (B) we are prided for accessibility and community is accommodating to disability. This is unusual. Just recently at the university- we had to deal with the campus- how do you get around- it is just beginning to be aware -you don't see a lot of disabled people around here// wheelchairs//don't see that they have access to college education, with all our talk, 22 years of teaching and I had one girl who was nearly blind with a seeing eye dog and I do not remember any other disabled students-

Most do not have access to university -**people are not comfortable with them – shy, embarrassed especially if they have deformities**...we hide them in institutions, out of the States most countries deal with it daily because they do not have funds, here (USA) you get the idea everyone is healthy. My personal break through was in Nicaragua where they are normalized – the same as I am. Personally, in Nicaragua, ministering for severely disabled- shocked at first- they could not move, or talk, feed, or take care of natural functions- but there was a little person in there who can relate and give and receive love as a friend.

Participant 3: At 4 o'clock mass a student- girl from campus with a wheelchair- **she is welcomed and not treated differently** but as far as Jesuits with disabilities- deaf- don't remember his name – he was just one of the crowd – then there was Curry – a dynamic person.

Participant 4: The religious community on a day to day basis there has not been practical support- from Catholic secondary education the cost in a school situation has historically and even now been an argument to prevent children with significant disabilities to be accepted into most Catholic schools. Greater awareness in Catholic parents has pushed the envelope- what can be provided compared to public school. Parents want them to be in a faith and sacramental preparation atmosphere. Years ago- they were in orphanages, institutions- we are growing- honest. The parents pushed us forward- involve people with disabilities- physically adapt the buildings, find ways to include people in parish community- **the more people are included the more it breaks down the stereotypes and fears- it can be very edifying and help them grow in their faith.** We have come some ways but a lot further to go.

Participant 5: Fully and completely - children with disabilities there are programs for them to teach them the faith on their level and to give them mutual experiences on their level – I personally worked with children with Asperger and children with disabilities – for example, a young girl who could not read write or speak and was developmentally handicapped - **we created special processes to give expression to faith - processes were - she communicated by using a computer.** We would give her mother a copy of the prayer before services. In advance and she would know when the Our Father was coming and she would press a button that could express the Our Father and she could pray with the class.

The church itself in the design of new churches you are strongly encouraged required to have a ramp to the building and to the sanctuary - so people can go to sanctuary as servers - the pulpit goes up and down - so individuals in wheelchairs can go at mass. **There is this dramatic accommodation - for a full active participation in the liturgy.**

Children with disabilities may have strange sometimes violent behaviors. Does your (religious) community have any answers as to the significance, treatment, or cure for such conditions?

Participant 1: I think I'm correct in saying that we are pretty good at knowing what we can and cannot do – we would be upfront- we are not capable to handle – we would get support – **we are not Gods- you do what you can- there is grace in knowing what you can't do.** Overall view everyone is created

in God's image – everyone is to be loved, and supported, and respected. **God has no favorites- in Matthew He is there for the just and the unjust.**

Participant 2: **Defer to medical world institution and hospitals, throw up hands in despair and not deal with it.** Teachers must deal with the shouting out but teachers learned how to deal –our Catholic schools would not deal – they would pass it off to the public school, I doubt if our Catholic school teachers have the skills to do this- Catholic School is a haven from this kind of behavior.

Participant 3- Nothing comes to mind, we have never, I have never been in a community environment where that this has been brought up- do not acknowledge existence.

Participant 4: **I don't think we believe people are possessed by the devil anymore- when I was training for ordination- good psychology makes good theology.** We are beyond the times when there was a leper colony in Carrville and St. Francis of Assisi's time when church had a ritual where as a leper you were sent outside the city walls in ritualized exclusion- lighting of candle and snuffing it out.

Participant 5: No. with our young woman we would accommodate her by getting her a private tutor- **to help her deal with her pencil stabbing approach, hair grabbing approach to life** -- she could not speak read or write.

Reflection

Dominant within the analysis of the interview sub-themes is disability as an occasion for compassion; disability as a dynamic social issue; and disability as a vehicle for the understanding of the mystery of life. There is evidence in these interviews of an understanding and level of acceptance that was not possible in the early church. Looking at the experience presented by five generations of theologians familiar with teaching to the mission has permitted us to see a progression of acceptance. The acceptance focuses mostly on accommodations for liturgical participation. The interviews point out difficulties encountered in acceptance within the Jesuit educational community. The study raises questions concerning our mission as Jesuit educators; concerns that can be brought into the classroom, researched, and discussed.

Conclusion

According to The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (www.ncpd.org, download March 10, 2008) there are in excess of 14 million Catholics with disabilities of which:

- *8.1 million Catholics have a physical disability.*
- *1.3 million Catholics have sensory disabilities.*
- *560,000 Catholics are mentally retarded or cognitively disabled.*
- *700,000 Catholics are classified as mentally ill.*
- *3.6 million Catholics have assorted health problems which limit one or more of their daily living functions*
- *6 million Catholics report they have more than one disabling condition.*

As determined by the NCPD (Retrieved from www.ncpd.org on March 10, 2008):
92% of the general public expressed admiration for those with disabilities, "because they overcome so much"; 74% expressed pity; 58% had feelings

of awkwardness because they don't know how to behave around people with disabilities; 47% expressed fear because people with disabilities remind them of what could happen to them; 16% expressed anger because people with disabilities cause inconveniences and 9% expressed resentment because of feeling that those with disabilities get special benefits and privileges.

In a 1998 statement, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities*, American Bishops determined:

*Parish liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active, conscious participation according to their capacity. We should encourage **them** to do the Lord's work in the world according to **their** God-given talents and capacity.*

We are still searching for ways to be aware, how to recognize, to be sensitive, how to include people into full life of the church, worship, and education. What we say and what we believe has not always been reflected in our practices as we learn more we can integrate into our community.
(Participant Four)