

Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities

It says a lot about a society when a group of obstetricians and geneticists needs to be told by an 11-year-old girl that her life is worth living. According to *The New York Times*, “Sarah” told a roomful of medical specialists that she

likes to read. ... Math used to be hard, but it is getting easier. She plays clarinet in her school band. She is a junior girl scout and an aunt, and she likes to organize, so her room is very clean. Last year she won three medals in the Special Olympics.

“I am so lucky I get to do so many things,” she concluded. “I just want you to know, even though I have Down syndrome, it is O.K.”¹

Why would such a gathering be necessary? Because many of these specialists—like so many others in our society—have begun to think of babies as material goods, as products adults create to enhance their lives. And if the “product” is flawed and beyond the power of medicine to correct, we simply send it back. Tragically, the attitude of such experts carries enormous weight when couples are confronted with a diagnosis of disability in their unborn child. In an attempt to offer couples full disclosure of potential health and learning challenges, many specialists present a gloomy picture of the child’s prospects. And many urge parents to consider abortion, contributing to the shameful fact that about ninety percent of unborn children diagnosed with Down syndrome are aborted. Given this high “termination” rate, in the future it will be even less likely that parents and specialists personally experience the love and joy that children with Down syndrome or other disabilities can bring to their families and communities.

Unborn children diagnosed with physical or mental limitations are particularly at risk of being killed because abortion is legally available throughout the United States, and many people believe parents have a “right” to decide to end the life of an unborn child who may not measure up to their expectations.

But the threat to the lives of people with disabilities does not end at birth. Parents of special needs children, and adults with disabilities who are able to seek their own medical care, often have to fight for medical treatment that routinely would be given to someone with no overt disability. It’s as if those with disabilities bear the burden of proving to medical personnel that they are better off alive than dead!

And of course, millions of Americans who have enjoyed excellent health and fitness throughout most of their lives may discover firsthand in their later years the pervasive bias against providing treatment to those with diminished mental and physical abilities. Further, when dementia robs

an individual of the ability for “meaningful” communication, many people today misguidedly consider that individual to be expendable. This must change.



In his encyclical letter *The Gospel of Life*, Blessed John Paul II identified “the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of man” (no. 21). In fact, “when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life” (Ibid.). How often Blessed John Paul II reminded us that “every human person—no matter how vulnerable or helpless, no matter how young or how old, no matter how healthy, handicapped or sick, no matter how useful or productive for society—is a being of inestimable worth created in the image and likeness of God.”²

Our secular culture’s blindness to the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities led Blessed John Paul to say:

The starting point for every reflection on disability is rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology: even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature. Indeed, human beings, independently of the conditions in which they live or of what they are able to express, have a unique dignity and a special value from the very beginning of their life until the moment of natural death. ... In fact, ... it is in the more difficult and disturbing situations that the dignity and grandeur of the human being emerges. The wounded humanity of the disabled challenges us to recognize, accept and promote in each one of these brothers and sisters of ours the incomparable value of the human being created by God.³

Paradoxically, in some respects our society has made considerable progress in recognizing, accepting, and promoting the equality of persons with disabilities. Likewise, medical science has found cures for, or at least ways to alleviate, some handicaps, so persons with disabilities can live out their lives as fully as possible while making extraordinary contributions to society.

But there are many worrisome trends today that reflect a fear and an inability to embrace persons with disabilities as brothers and sisters. We are becoming more utilitarian, less compassionate, and less generous in making the sacrifices needed to treat all persons with dignity and respect. Often those with disabilities, the very ill, and the elderly are spoken about as burdens, and their care is evaluated by a crude cost/benefit analysis that ignores their equal and inherent dignity.



Consider the celebrated English pundit, Virginia Ironside, who announced on air to the stunned moderator of a television talk show: “If I were the mother of a suffering child ... I would be the first to want to put a pillow over its face.” She added that any “loving mother” would feel that way. And if she were to smother her child, claiming to have acted out of compassion, she might well get away with murder, as another Englishwoman did in 2010. Although the facts were clear, a jury acquitted the mother of assisting in the suicide of her 31-year-old daughter, a beautiful young woman who had chronic fatigue syndrome. The trial judge applauded the verdict as showing “that common sense, decency and humanity which makes jury trials so important in a case of this kind.” To condone a mother’s role in her daughter’s death with terms like decency and humanity is to strip these words of all meaning.

The trend toward doing away with these lives reflects a fear of embracing those who pose a challenge to our love and generosity, who upset our comfort levels. And it is a measure of our worth as a people how we embrace that challenge, as Blessed John Paul II has explained:

*The measure of civilization, a universal and permanent measure which includes all cultures, is its relationship with life. A civilization which rejected the defenseless would deserve to be called a barbarian civilization, even though it had great success in the field of economics, technology, art and science.*⁴

Not every person with a disability can make a concretely measurable contribution to society. Many will simply require our care and service. But in meeting this need, we discover a great truth: Persons with disabilities challenge us to be more fully human and compassionate, to recognize the presence of God in each human being. This requires us to sacrifice, to “stretch our hearts,” as Pope Benedict XVI has said. This requires us to gradually become more like Christ, which is after all the goal of every Christian life.

In short, as persons with disabilities share their gifts and needs, they bring out the best in our mutual humanity. They challenge us to live the Gospel precepts of charity in the real world, to sacrifice some of our comfort for others, to take the time to enable them to be full members of society. They need to feel our solidarity with them, and to know their true dignity and worth as fellow sisters and brothers in Christ. Our own future with Christ depends on it.

1 Amy Harmon, “Prenatal Test Puts Down Syndrome in Hard Focus,” *The New York Times*, May 9, 2007.

2 Remarks at departure ceremony at the Detroit Airport, September 19, 1987.

3 Message to the International Symposium on the “Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,” January 5, 2004, used with permission of Libreria Editrice Vaticana. All rights reserved.

4 Homily at the Shrine of St. Joseph, Kalisz, Poland, June 4, 1997.