

## **Thoughts on Persons with a Disability**

### **Respect Life Celebration**

*February 2008*

**Our evening together is a celebration of life, of being alive -- which we do particularly well through song! In a sense, we gather to celebrate all living beings, but in particular, we gather to celebrate *human* living beings whom we believe to be created more immediately and more fully in the image of God. Created with the capacity to know and to love and to be creative, human beings, *we*, are akin to God who is light and who is love.**

**In seeking to celebrate and to promote the gift of human life, we become sensitive to nature, the wondrous and indispensable environment for human life, and we become particularly sensitive to human life *where it is most hidden*, for example:**

- **in the womb**
- **in those members of society who, for various reasons, have been set apart on death row**
- **in persons whose body and/or psyche is disfigured and whose beauty is thus more hidden**

**Before considering the latter, this is to say, human life in persons with a handicap, with disabilities, and thus with special needs, I first propose that we look through a little window to catch a glimpse of their beauty. Consider this slide presentation.**

**These persons, of whom we just saw a few images, are often the hidden members of our communities -- even our *parish* communities: a surprising and unfortunate fact. A parish community ought to be the most welcoming, the most comforting place in society. These persons ought to be at the *center* of the parish community. And yet families with a disabled member are sometimes reticent to come to a parish. Why is this so? This is so perhaps because there is the expectation that liturgy be beautiful and prayerfully silent, and persons with disabilities can disrupt that. This is so because in Church, although children of God, we remain human beings. And, for us**

human beings, it is very difficult and very uncomfortable to see a fellow human being disfigured in any way. It is also, incidentally, very difficult and very uncomfortable for such fellow human beings *to be seen*.

The challenge, therefore, is for us to see *beyond appearances*:

- *As human beings* we can see differently if we but realize that our own humanity -- that is to say, our capacity to think clearly or to make good choices or to be prolific-- is sometimes stifled or clouded: for example, by deep sadness, by grave illness, by raging anger. What we see, therefore, is never what we get. No matter what may be happening in a person's body or psyche, deep inside, the capacity to know and to love and to be creative is intact.
- *As children of God*, we can see differently because we are given different eyes. The Christian tradition has come to believe that persons with disabilities enjoy a love of predilection. Jesus draws near to and indwells them in a special way. Moreover, through their brokenness, Jesus gazes upon us. As children of God, we discover the privilege of sharing with these our special Brothers and Sisters, who, in turn, teach us what it means to be *beloved of God*.

In 1964, Jean Vanier, former Navy captain and professor of philosophy (whom we quoted in our visual meditation), founded the L'Arche community in France.

L'Arche seeks to create a familial life around persons with a mental handicap, in the spirit of the Beatitudes. Jean beautifully articulates what such communities and thus what the Church is invited to experience:

"The mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them. Mission is revealing to others their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things, to meet God. Mission is transmitting to people a new inner freedom and hope; it is unlocking the doors of their being so that new energies can

**flow; it is taking away from their shoulders the terrible yoke of guilt and fear. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are by God, with the mixture of good and evil, light and darkness that is in them; that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden can be rolled away."**

**Let us celebrate the gift of life, both human and divine. To celebrate such gifts is to be grateful and therefore to cherish. And gratitude and cherishing keep us youthful.**