

Speaking of Disability: Pastoral Guidelines on Language by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability

Despite their usefulness and indispensability for most people, written and spoken languages have undeniable limitations and evolve over time. These limitations are perhaps nowhere more evident than in discussing what are commonly called disabilities. This word itself, insofar as it focuses on what a person might not be able to do —thereby perhaps obscuring recognition of that person’s capabilities and gifts — exemplifies the limitations of language in this realm of human experience.

However, we must not allow the difficulty of conversation regarding disability to deter us from undertaking it. On the contrary, it highlights the need to develop and exercise our ability to do so in a manner that fully respects the dignity of the human person living with what — for lack of a better word — we currently call disability. This document is humbly intended as a small step in the direction of such responsible, respectful discourse.

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) offers the following rationale and examples of appropriate language as an aid for individuals, families, parishes, dioceses, and other organizations who seek to represent persons who have disabilities in a way that is respectful and dignified. NCPD seeks to uphold and model the highest practical standards related to the reality and experience of disability, to promote and support the full and meaningful participation of people with disabilities within the life of the Church and throughout the wider society (Charity in Truth, §5). The Christian concern regarding appropriate language is animated by a commitment to proclaim the truth of Christ’s love in society (Charity in Truth §§17-18; On Social Concerns §46).

Every human being bears the image of God. For that reason, the language used in reference to any person should always reflect our innate dignity and call to fulfillment in Christ. (Document of the Holy See for the International Year of Disabled Persons, §§1-3). This rationale and attached style guide build upon resources and guidelines developed by respected secular organizations that serve persons who have a disability.

First: Language or terminology that excessively emphasizes differences obscures our commonalities, unintentionally alienating persons and undermining the Christian commitment to solidarity. Such separation can chill the sense of personal welcome that is an important precursor to an encounter with the love of God within the Christian community (The Joy of the Gospel, §§24, 127-129).

Second: Vulnerability to impairment, illness, injury and disability is an ordinary part of human life. Unfortunately, a historical overemphasis on the undesirable limitations and unpleasant experiences that can sometimes follow from such vulnerability has given rise to terms and epithets that may not be pejorative in intent but are nonetheless hurtful in effect. In recent decades, a wider cultural awareness has arisen about the importance of speech that promotes the common good and the wellbeing of others. One important implication for Christian communities has been a deeper appreciation for the primacy of the person. This appreciation for guiding our language and attitude about disability reflects

the Christian understanding that every human being bears the unique dignity of being a person formed in the image and likeness of God. Disability undermines neither personal identity nor human dignity.

Third: The languages and cultures of humanity are always changing and growing. Likewise, language and terminology related to the reality and experience of impairment, illness, injury, and disability also change and grow over time. The meaning of any particular word or term is defined by the ways it is used within the wider community and culture. For Christians, this means that understanding and knowing how to use appropriate terminology related to disability requires attention to the particular persons involved, the cultural context and Gospel principles affirmed in our Catholic Tradition (e.g., Matt 5:22, Psalm 73; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qq. 72 & 75.) Here are four examples of this dynamic:

- 1) A shift in cultural awareness has led to generally accepted norms about not using certain disability-related words, many of which were once considered neutral, because they are now regarded as dehumanizing (e.g., “crazy,” “cripple,” “handicapped,” “mentally retarded,” “mongoloid,” “psycho,” “spastic,” “wheelchair-bound”).
- 2) Words or gestures that are not intended to be malicious, nevertheless, can communicate a lack of personal regard or an assumption of a need that has not been expressed, if they do not accurately reflect the reality, experience, or preference of the particular person being addressed.

Examples include referring to accessible parking as “handicapped parking,” referring to a member of the Deaf community as disabled, or directing a person to a designated “handicapped” seating section rather than allowing them to sit with their family or in a preferred seat.

- 3) Some language intended to express care and concern may be experienced as patronizing insofar as the words attribute child-like innocence to persons with disabilities (e.g., referring to children and adults as “angels,” referring to adults as children, regarding persons with intellectual disabilities as incapable of moral accountability or sin, or referring to parish ministries as “special needs”).
- 4) Other words or terms, although well-meant, might feel insulting when spoken with a presumption that living with a disability involves moral heroics, personal tragedy, or self-pity (e.g., “I’m so sorry you’re confined to that wheelchair,” “That family has a heavy cross to bear,” “You are so brave and inspirational”).

Fourth: Attention to the personal and cultural complexities of disability-related terminology, and our awareness of the ongoing evolution of language, can help us think wisely about the various resources we have in the Catholic Tradition. For example, Church documents that contain terminology now considered inappropriate should be read with an awareness of their historical context. Their authors’ good intentions are generally evident from a consideration of the document’s overall message. This kind of thoughtful consideration can help Christian ministers recognize older Church documents as valuable resources and teachings that could possibly be overlooked, but which nevertheless remain relevant to the reality and experience of persons within the Church who have a disability.

Conclusion: Christ calls each Christian to extend the love of God to his or her neighbor. The solidarity and personal regard that follow from such love include a living attentiveness to the gift of our words, and the kind of respect we extend to our neighbor when our words are seasoned with thoughtful consideration. Anxiety about possibly using the wrong word or terminology could hinder someone from welcoming and engaging an unfamiliar person. However, it is important to remember that neighborly love and personal warmth are easy to recognize in someone who earnestly seeks to encounter another. A first encounter should presume that the other person possesses abilities and competencies that transcend any apparent limitations.

Even in the midst of such challenges, our efforts to grow in knowledge and comfort with language pertaining to disability will help the Church to convey the appropriate sense of belonging to all of its members – including those living with a disability – thus enriching the life of the faith community as a whole.

Standardized Access Symbols for Use on Facility Signage and Printed Materials



Access for persons who are blind or have low vision



Audio description of visual elements embedded into video media for persons who are blind or have low vision



Printed materials in 18 point or larger



Printed materials and signage available in Braille



Sign language interpretation provided for liturgy, performances, or presentations



Access for individuals with limited mobility





Live audio descriptions of liturgy, visual or performing arts, by way of live commentary, usually via headphone and a small transmitter



Assistive listening that transmits sound via hearing aids or headset



Closed captioning for the Deaf or hard of hearing embedded into visual media

The following are sample parish communiques that demonstrate the inclusion of parishioners with disabilities through respectful language.

Some individuals who have a developmental disability¹, like autism spectrum disorder², are learning to attend and participate in Mass. Please be patient with behavior that may appear irreverent or inappropriate for the Sacred Liturgy. Your understanding of their learning process supports the tireless efforts of parents and catechists who help to fulfill our parish's mission to serve all members of the Body of Christ.

1. Individuals who have a developmental disability - This is an example of person-first language and does not refer to a group such as "the disabled." The term "developmental disability" covers a wide range of physical and/or intellectual disabilities that occur before the age 22, and are likely to be lifelong.
2. Autism Spectrum Disorder – This term refers to any form of autism, with varying impairments in three areas of development: social skills, language, and behavior.

We welcome our Deaf parishioners and members of the Deaf¹ community from outside our parish and will reserve the front pew for them to ensure they have visual access² to the interpreter, celebrant, and all other liturgical ministers in the sanctuary. Please welcome Mary Jones, a certified sign language interpreter, to Holy Name Parish. Mary will begin interpreting for the Deaf at the 10 am Sunday Mass.

1. The Deaf - refers to deafness as a culture rather than a disability. Many individuals who are born deaf, become deaf, or are hard of hearing view themselves as a unique cultural and linguistic minority who use sign language as their primary language: visual/ gestural in nature (American Sign Language, ASL); and a shared culture. The Deaf and hard of hearing community may have either Deaf or hearing family members who can also be considered part of this community. Because of the shared cultural reference, it is considered respectful to refer to the Deaf community as a group and capitalize the word, "Deaf," as opposed to the typical recommendation of person-first language, "people who are deaf."
2. Visual Access – Since the Deaf take in all communication visually, it is vital that a sign- language interpreter be visible within the line of sight to the sanctuary.

All parishioners and guests who use wheelchairs¹, walkers, or other mobility aids are welcome to sit wherever you are comfortable in the church. Service animals for persons who are blind² or have other disabilities are also welcome. If you need assistance finding accessible seating³, or would like a minister to bring the Eucharist to you at your seat, please tell an usher.

1. All parishioners and guests who use wheelchairs – This is an example of person-first language and does not denote negative images such as “wheelchair bound.”
2. Persons who are blind – This is an example of person-first language and does not refer to individuals as a group, such as “the blind.”
3. Accessible seating – Ideally, a congregation has options for accessible seating throughout the worship space rather than a designated “handicapped” section.

Registration for our parish faith formation is open to everyone. Please include any accommodations¹ needed to facilitate success in learning.

1. Accommodations – These are alterations in the environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allow persons with diverse learning needs to gain access to content or complete assigned tasks.

A bible study class led by Deacon Smith will begin a 6-week session. All are welcome. If you need any accommodations¹ to participate, such as a sign language interpreter², large print³ or Braille⁴ materials, please let us know. Mentors available for parishioners with intellectual disabilities⁵, if needed for more meaningful participation.

1. Accommodations – In this example, accommodations, such as those listed below, are provided to individuals with disabilities to enable them to access their faith.
2. Sign language interpreter – Facilitates communication between the Deaf and those who are hearing, during liturgies, faith formation, and any Church presentation, going from spoken word to sign language and sign language to spoken word.
3. Large print - Printed materials in 18-point or larger non-serif font to enable persons with low vision to read text.
4. Braille – A form of written language for persons who are blind, in which characters are represented by patterns of raised dots that are felt with the fingertips.
5. Intellectual disabilities – A disability characterized by significant limitation both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills; and originates before age 18 (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities).

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We need constantly to ensure that present-day forms of communication are in fact guiding us to generous encounter with others, to honest pursuit of the whole truth, to service, to closeness to the underprivileged and to the promotion of the common good.

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