

**Faith Formation Convocation, Diocese of Providence
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**“Habitual Lack of the Use of Reason and the Reception of Sacraments”
(Session 1)**

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Good morning. I am honored to be with you today. This morning we’ve gathered to think about missionary discipleship, the sacraments, and Catholics who lack the use of reason.

I’d like to begin by telling you about my brother. His name is Vicente. From the day of his birth, up to today, my brother has lived with a profound cognitive impairment. Although Vicente is forty-one years old, his abilities are similar to the developmental level we tend to associate with infants at the age of six-months. My brother cannot walk, speak, or feed himself—and, as far as we can tell, he lacks the ability to understand and use symbolic language.

Meals, bathing, the love and embrace of family—everything related to my brother’s well-being depends entirely upon the care he receives from others. In recent years, the primary responsibility for my brother has been transitioning from my parents, to my wife and I...and now into our home, with our four children.

The usual diagnosis for persons like my brother is that they have a “severe intellectual disability” or a “profound cognitive impairment”—or, in the language of the *Code of Canon Law*, Vicente would be described as someone who “habitually lacks the use of reason.”

As St Thomas Aquinas has helped me understand my experience of Vicente and the teachings of the Catholic Church, I’m convinced of at least two things:

- I’m convinced that *there is nothing defective* about my brother’s humanity or his aptitude for knowledge and love of God.
- I’m convinced that *there is nothing abnormal* about his membership in the Body of Christ or his call to Christian discipleship.

This is my understanding of how Christians account for the basic anthropological, moral, soteriological, and vocational implications of a profound and utterly debilitating cognitive impairment.

Vicente helps me think about the 2018 theme of the Faith Formation Convocation—evangelization and missionary discipleship; and, in particular, Vicente helps me think about the evangelical work of sacramental catechesis in case of Christians who lack the full use of reason.

Here’s what I want to do with our time:

First, to make sure we are all on the same page, I want to start off with a few general remarks on sacramental access in case of Christians who have an intellectual disability. From there, I’d like to spend most of our time together thinking, in focused way, about *sacramental catechesis*—as most you already know, sacramental catechesis is the first step and very often the main road block when it comes to the sacraments of initiation for Catholics who have a severe intellectual disability.

To begin: The Seven Sacraments and the use of reason:

The sacraments form the center of our celebration of the Christian Mystery—in each, the healing and salvific work of Christ is continued and made present to the Church. Because all are called by God to personal growth, maturity of faith, and holiness, all who are baptized are called to full participation in the sacraments and have a right to adequate sacramental catechesis (GDC, 167).

Here’s a quick walk-through, drawing from the *Code of Canon Law* and the USCCB *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (1995, 2017). For each of the seven sacraments, I’m going to focus on the points that relevant persons who have a severe intellectual disability.

With the **Sacrament of Baptism**, the fact that we baptize infants usually simplifies this question for Catholics. Persons who lack the use of reason are to be baptized so long as at least one parent or guardian consents.¹

The Sacrament of Confirmation is a continuation along the path of Christian initiation begun at baptism. According to the *Code of Canon Law*, ordinarily Confirmation is conferred after a person has reached the “age of reason” or the “age of discretion.” And all baptized Catholics who possess the use of reason can receive the Sacrament of Confirmation if they are “suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew the baptismal promises.” However, and this is important, according to *Canon Law* the use of reason is not a prerequisite for receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation—persons who may never attain the use of reason can be confirmed with appropriate catechesis and pastoral guidance.² I’ll say more about Confirmation in a few minutes.

The celebration of **the Eucharist** is the center of the Christian life—and the criteria for reception of Holy Communion is the same for persons with severe intellectual disabilities as for all persons: namely, that the person be able to “distinguish the body of Christ from ordinary food,” even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally.³ According to *Canon Law* and the *USCCB Guidelines*, cases of doubt where the only question is about what the person understands should be resolved in favor of the right of the Catholic to receive the sacrament.⁴

With the Sacrament of Penance, only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing mortal sin. As long as the individual is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution. However, persons with profound intellectual disabilities (those who absolutely lack the use of reason) are incapable of willfully separating themselves from the mercy of God.⁵

Through the **Anointing of the Sick**, the Church commends to the suffering and glorified Lord the faithful who are ill and physically suffering. Since severe intellectual disability does not necessarily indicate an illness or suffering, Catholics who lack the use of reason should receive the Anointing of the Sick on the

¹ See CIC, cc. 868, §1, 1^o and 852.

² See CIC, c. 885, 889, 890.

³ CIC, c. 913, §2; see Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (February 22, 2007), 58.

⁴ SG, para. 21-26.

⁵ SG, para. 28; See CIC, cc. 978, §1, 979, and 981.

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same basis and under the same circumstances as any other member of the Church. If there is doubt as to whether the sick person has attained the use of reason, the sacrament is to be conferred when the Catholic is ill or physically suffering.⁶

Sacrament of Holy Orders: The existence of a physical disability does not on its own disqualify a person from Holy Orders. However, candidates for ordination must possess the necessary physical and cognitive abilities to fulfill the ministry function.⁷

For the **Sacrament of Marriage**, intellectual disability does not disqualify a couple from being called to the vocation of married life. However, according to *Canon Law* and the *USCCB Guidelines* “for matrimonial consent to be valid, it is necessary that both persons possess a sufficient use of reason; that they be free of any grave lack of discretion affecting their judgment about the rights and duties to which they are committing themselves; and that they have the mental capacity to assume the essential obligations of the married state.”⁸

None of these teachings are new. In fact, they all reflect the sacramental theology of St Thomas Aquinas—in St Thomas, we find explicit and unambiguous engagement with questions on the administration of each of the sacraments in the case of persons who have a profound cognitive impairment or debilitating mental illness. Nevertheless, it’s not difficult to find confusion about these matters in various corners of the US Catholic Church.

In my experience, once the practical norms on sacramental access are understood, if there is any real point of confusion among pastors and diocesan ministers, it tends to be about *sacramental catechesis*. Specifically, how should diocesan directors, parish pastors, and catechists extend the ministry of sacramental catechesis to Catholics who have a profound cognitive impairment or severe intellectual disability?

⁶ See CIC, c. 1001-1005.

⁷ See CIC, cc. 1029 and 1041.

⁸ See CIC, c. 1095.

Here is my central claim... and it is a claim that is animated by my experience with my bother:

With an eye towards “intellectual disability” and “profound cognitive impairment,” we’re capable of implementing all kinds of programmatic and methodological changes to the ministry of sacramental catechesis. However, no amount of tinkering with catechesis will be adequate to the gift occasioned by persons like my brother, if we don’t first recognize how the Gospel challenges some of our most precious presumptions about the significance of “intellectual disability.”⁹

Unexamined cultural and theoretical presumptions about what we mean when we say “disability” can undermine our concern for faithful catechetical practices.

The challenge of the Gospel is much more radical than expanding our programs and methodologies to accommodate a special interest group called “the intellectually disabled.” The challenge, rather, is to recover an understanding of sacramental catechesis that reflects the personal encounter, dynamism, and evangelical impetus of Christian mercy.

Only when we remember that sacramental catechesis is a work of mercy—in the case of all persons, regardless of ability—will we understand how the impairment or disability of a particular person relates to the ordinary pastoral life of the Church.

I have two points to offer for your consideration, based on lessons I’ve learned from my brother. I’ve organized my remarks around two questions.

1. Why do Christians attend to differences in ability?
2. How should differences in ability be navigated by diocesan ministers?

2. Why do Christians pay attention to differences in ability?

Let’s think about our cultural context. In our time, Christians are faced with the temptation to accept a heretical view of the human being. Throughout western culture, and in some corners of Christianity, an ideology of autonomy is promoted that makes an idol out of strength. It’s generally presumed, in western culture, that a fully human and flourishing life means freedom from need, freedom from limits, freedom from history, and freedom from nature.

We’re all familiar with the ways this modern ideology of autonomy is manifest in the social sphere: the lives of inconvenient persons are snuffed out, the poor are exploited, the weak are abused, and common goods are stolen for individual profit. What Christians sometimes overlook is how the ideology of autonomy can seep into our everyday descriptions of the human good, human happiness, and the practices of Christian discipleship.

The false freedom of autonomy casts a golden caricature of strength as the measure of man. It is a rationalistic, best-case anthropology that presents *human flourishing as a life unfettered* by the inconveniences of the body, family, culture, and community. When strength and independence are idolized, conditions like vulnerability, frailty, and dependency are not accepted as part of what it means to be a human being. Rather, vulnerability and dependency are defects, evidence of a corrupt or unfulfilled existence. When strength is our idol, the “normal” human being is not impaired or infirm—rather, normal humanity, natural humanity is a splendid and imaginary ideal of carnal integrity, proportion, agility, and comeliness.

⁹ See the Introduction and Basic Principles given in *Document of the Holy See for the International Year of Disabled Persons* [March 4, 1981], (Boston, MA; St Paul Editions); see also *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), nos. 13-14.

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The relevance of this cultural ideology to sacramental catechesis lay in our presumptions about how, exactly, the limitations and dependencies of “disability” relate to our understanding of faithful catechesis.

Because of the particular way my brother’s brain was damaged at birth, he does not speak, make eye contact, or communicate with ordinary gestures like pointing or nodding. As far as we can tell, my brother does not understand the conceptual meaning of our words. Obviously, communication involves more than a faculty for speech—but when it comes to words and gestures, my brother seems to lack the ability to use symbolic language.

That being said, Vicente can recognize the sound of his name, familiar voices, and his favorite music. And he has always had an open and receptive posture toward whatever is happening around him. My brother has a good life, filled with family, clumsy children, savory food, and good music.

I think back to my childhood, being raised alongside Vicente and participating in the daily care for his wellbeing. I can recognize, in retrospect, that my brother’s life presented me with a choice. I was pressed into that choice when my well-intentioned friends would ask *What is wrong with your brother?*

The choice was never between loyalty to my friends and loyalty to my brother. The real choice was between *the premise of my friends’ question* and my mother’s claim that “there is nothing wrong with your brother...there is nothing wrong with Vicente, he just needs extra help.”

What interests me here are the presumptions that distinguish the outlook of my friends from the outlook of my mother. In other words, *why would anyone think that there is something wrong with my brother?* Where must someone be standing to even think of asking that kind question?

Obviously, in the case of my friends, we can assume that there were unmet expectations—a noteworthy and surprising difference. It is certainly unusual to see the familiar actions of an infant performed in the body of an adult man. And, for most people, there is the general lack of relevant experience. What I want to highlight are the presumptions that cause one to see “a deviance” and not “a difference;” the presumptions that cause one to see “a corruption” and not “a limitation.”

In the case of my friends, we can recognize how their question reflects the ideological outlook of western culture. With that in mind and in the same vein, it may be prudent for us to pause...to pause in order to ask ourselves *What kind of presumptions are embedded in the polite recognition of our session title that some people “habitually lack the use of reason.”?*

Why would anyone think that the “disability” of a particular Christian is relevant, either positively or negatively, to the ministry of catechesis within the Church? Why would recognition of differences in ability be meaningful to ministers trying to think well about sacramental catechesis?

There are several ways the relevance of “disability” to sacramental catechesis could be understood. I’d like to describe two, one that is dehumanizing and one that is Christian.

On the one hand, presuming western culture’s ugly and dehumanizing ideology of autonomy and strength, the relevance could be framed in terms of the kind of mastery and excellence we hope to result from our catechetical efforts. Understood in that way, the degree to which a person could or could not participate in a “normal” catechetical program would indicate his or her potential to achieve our ideal of unfettered, Christian flourishing. That is to say, our ideal balance of doctrinal knowledge, moral rectitude, and contemplative disposition.

In other words, one possible reason to distinguish between “ability” and “disability” is to ensure that those with less potential for excellence don’t slowdown or hinder the instruction of those who have the highest potential for excellence. When we idolize autonomy and strength, we differentiate levels of ability to protect the integrity of “normal catechesis”—the reason we identify persons with disabilities and provide them with “special catechesis” is not for their benefit, but for the benefit and convenience of others. In that way, “the disabled” are politely distinguished by their deviance from all the normal things we do not bother to name. Clearly this is a repulsive view, but I’m confident most of you will recognize the impulse, and its effect on your ministry.

On the other hand, we can approach the relevance of disability to sacramental catechesis following the guidance of Pope Saint John Paul II—to begin with, he reminds us that the starting point for Christian reflection on “disability” must always be rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology.¹⁰

Following his lead, here is one way of thinking theologically about the catechetical significance of “disability”: The recognition that we are composite creatures, a spiritual and corporeal unity, is basic to the Christian account of the human being. For this reason, Christian doctrine on our integral dignity has always included an affirmation of the goodness of the human body and an affirmation that the vulnerability and dependency of our bodies is consistent with our specific place in the good order of God’s creation.¹¹

In other words, following the lead of Pope John Paul—as articulated in *Evangelium Vitae* (nos. 96, 97) and elsewhere—Christians believe that the vulnerability and dependencies of the human body are creaturely goods, enduring aspects of our original nakedness, which are not in themselves a cause for shame.¹² *Who told you that you’re naked? Who told you that there is something wrong with you? Who told you that your limitations, vulnerabilities, and dependencies are unnatural?*

Thus, for Christian catechists, the only meaningful difference between an “able-bodied person” and a “person who has a disability” is the particular form and degree of their limitation—because we are all limited and vulnerable creatures.

Understood in that way, the relevance of “disability” to catechesis takes on a difference shape. When catechists engage the topic of disability in a manner that reflects the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology, “specialized catechesis for persons with disabilities” is not an alternative to the “normal catechesis for able-bodied persons.” There is no such thing as a disembodied, cultureless, “normal catechesis,” free from context, community, and history. The Good News of Jesus Christ always meets us in our particular circumstances, through the evangelical witness of particular persons.

When catechists engage the topic of disability, they are reflecting upon something basic and fundamental to the way the Gospel is communicated from one generation to the next. Catechesis is a relationship where limited and impaired catechists provide instruction and guidance to limited and impaired catechumen. There is no “us” and “them,” there is just “us.” From there, any differences we specify among “us,” within the Body of Christ, are premised by a more determinative judgment about our common creaturely limitation, vulnerability, and interdependence.

¹⁰ Pope Saint John Paul II, “On the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,” no. 2.

¹¹ Gen. 1:26-27, 2:7, 18-25; Psalm 8; *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 12, 14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1934-8.

¹² Pope Saint John Paul II, “The Presence of Evil and Suffering in the World,” June 4, 1986, nos. 5-7; See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 154-156, 238-242.

Approached from the Christian account of the human being, our engagement with the significance of “disability” to catechesis is not raising a new and external question. Rather, we are exploring something integral to the Christian understanding of catechesis. We do not attend to differences in ability for the purpose of excluding an inconvenient group, to protect some imaginary catechetical norm, or to expand the core ministry of our diocese. Rather, we distinguish between different kinds and degrees of ability so that catechists can *accommodate* their catechetical instruction to the particular limitations and impairments of each catechumen.

As I see it, that is what the *General Directory for Catechesis* means by our obligation to provide “adequate catechesis” to every member of the Body of Christ.

[Some implications]

We can step back at this point, and think about the difference this understanding would make for the work of sacramental catechesis. The sacraments do, indeed, afford precious occasions for catechesis. For catechists, the ordinary life and rhythms of the community are the living context of their work. That work is to facilitate growth and to encourage the progress of particular persons toward a deeper and more profound knowledge and love of the Creator.

“Growth in knowledge and growth in love,” that is why the work of the catechist matters.

Christians believe that every human being is capable of knowing and loving God, that every person is called to holiness and virtue, and that nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God. Christians believe that no form or degree of bodily impairment, short of death, can definitively frustrate or undermine our inalienable aptitude for knowledge and love of God...and, *per our hope in Christ*, not even death. As I understand it, this is the teaching of the Catholic Church—and I think one of the most beautiful and persuasive engagements with this outlook is found in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas.

As we learn from St Thomas, it is by knowledge and by love that creatures who are made in the image of God are perfected in the likeness of their Creator. Understanding and love, of course, are more complex than the use of reason and the capacity for moral deliberation. What is central to the Christian view, as St Thomas explains it, is that the specific intellectual dignity of every human being is ordered towards embodiment and develops in time. *Why does this matter for catechesis?*

What this means is that the development of every person’s knowledge and every person’s ability to act is limited, without exception. And, further, it means that every human being is dependent upon someone else *to teach him what he does not know* and *to guide him on how to act* in response to the knowledge acquired.

Within the Christian tradition, attending to the needs of ignorant and confused persons are considered spiritual works of mercy: *To instruct the ignorant on speculative matters* and *to counsel the doubtful on practical matters*.

The implication here is that every catechetical encounter will involve attention to the particular limitations and dependencies of each catechumen—this is the ordinary, daily significance of our common status as vulnerable and dependent beings. So conceived—and this is the key point—the only reason catechists distinguish between the abilities of particular catechumen is to determine what kind of accommodations are appropriate to the circumstance, because every circumstance calls for accommodations.

2. How should differences in ability be navigated by diocesan ministers?

Specialized catechesis is not offered as an alternative to some idealized, disembodied catechetical norm that exists outside time, culture, community, and history. So, our second question: if the reason for distinguishing between different kinds of ability in catechesis is about accommodating the particular limitations of each catechumen (and not about isolating or excluding something undesirable), what does this tell us about how differences in ability should be navigated within the ministry of a given diocese?

On the point of appropriate accommodations, the *General Directory for Catechesis*—drawing from *Gaudium et Spes* (44)—reminds us that the “law for all evangelization” is to faithfully adapt the genuine message of the Gospel (GDC, 169). Good and faithful catechesis accommodates the proclamation of the revealed word to meet each person, taking into account the diversity of circumstances and situations, including age, intellectual development, psychological condition, and spiritual maturity (GDC, 170).

In the ordinary way, because every human being is called to salvation and capable of growth in holiness, persons who have a physical or cognitive impairment, mental illness, or other limitation have a right—like everyone else—to adequate catechesis, adapted to their particular circumstance (GDC, 189).

Alongside that, as I see it, an equally pressing and urgent circumstance for Christians living in western culture is the ideology of autonomy and the idolatry of strength. This circumstance is a serious threat to the Christian identity of catechumen who have limitations and dependencies that are easy to hide, easy to forget, and easy to ignore. We owe an adequate catechesis to persons in that circumstance, too.

Specialized catechesis for persons who have a disability

The fact that my brother is unable to use symbolic language does not mean that he cannot be introduced to the Good News. Although Vicente’s cognitive aptitude is similar to what’s usually associated with infancy, *my brother is not an infant*. He is not an infant, he is not a child, he is not an adolescent...my brother is a forty-one-year-old man, with forty-one years’ worth of experiences, habits, preferences, and prudential judgments. He receives his food, sucks his thumb, and holds his toys in a way that reflects the understanding and moral disposition of his forty-one years. And even though his cognitive aptitude doesn’t seem to have changed much in that forty-one years, we’ve seen him grow, develop, and mature.

At the beginning, I mentioned my conviction that there is *nothing abnormal or special* about my brother’s life or his membership in the Body of Christ. Although Vicente is unable to communicate verbally, he can clearly communicate certain preferences and intentions. And although his cognitive aptitude is profoundly limited, within that limitation there is an unmistakable process of growth and maturity.

As a matter of principle, catechists need to distinguish between different levels of ability in order to accommodate the particular limitations and dependencies of each catechumen. The practical norm established in the *General Directory* is that any specialized catechesis would remain connected to the general pastoral care of the community. Moreover, the *General Directory* acknowledges that the particular demands of catechesis in those circumstances will usually require specialized training in pedagogy and appropriate methods.

But it does not necessarily follow from these guidelines that catechumen with different abilities and limitations, even drastically different abilities and limitations, should be separated from each other. Certainly, Christians who are impaired like my brother do not learn in the same way and at the same pace as persons who are not impaired to the same degree—but that does not mean they cannot learn in a community of catechumen with diverse abilities.

Understandably, in a mixed-ability group of catechumens preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation, for example, there may be a worry that someone with a profound impairment would slowdown the pace of the group's instruction. But shouldn't we also recognize that the ability to keep pace with the weaker or more limited members of your parish community is one of the central goals of Christian sacramental catechesis?

Why would we ever presume that the process of sacramental catechesis should be insulated from the inconveniences of body, family, culture, and community that make up the Body of Christ? What kind of confusion? ...what kind of *idolatry*, could lead us to think that catechesis should be an experience unfettered by the frailties and dependencies of other Christians?

Conclusion

Given the Christian understanding of our common baptismal membership in the Body of Christ, it could be argued that whatever Christians might mean by "normal sacramental catechesis," the norm will always be set by the weakest and most vulnerable members of the parish community. As St Paul reminds the Corinthians, God has placed each part of the body where He wants it...thus the head cannot say to the feet "I do not need you" (I Cor. 12:15-26).

The precious gift occasioned by persons like my brother is not a challenge to expand our "normal" catechetical programs by adding something "special;" rather, the gift is an invitation to recover the interpersonal essence of Christian catechesis. It is in that light that I understand the outlook presented in the *General Directory for Catechesis*.

I believe the evangelical mission of the Church in the world requires catechists who have the courage to engage and accompany parish communities that are ***unwilling to leave behind the weakest and most vulnerable*** members of Christ's Body. We cannot forget that catechesis is more than religious instruction on doctrine, morals, and affective disposition.

Catechesis is about the communication of the Gospel to particular persons, accommodating—*translating the Good News* into strange and unprecedented circumstances. This is one key place where the evangelical impetus of missionary discipleship can support the fullest sacramental participation of Christians who have a severe intellectual disability or a profound cognitive impairment. Thank you.