

# Suggestions for Homilists

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*As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him."  
(Jn 9:1-3)*

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**T**he reflections in the first half of this section, as well as the more specific suggestions in the second half, may stimulate thoughts of the "disability" message to be found in various scriptural readings. We know that Christ reached out to the most vulnerable people of his day. We have only to consider the fragile lamb so often portrayed draped about his shoulders. Many Catholics are swept up in the popular culture's emphasis on bodily perfection and productivity. The message of the power of the powerless and the gift of our shared vulnerability is needed as we confront those tendencies.

## Reflections

John Paul II has given us many examples of ways in which our brothers and sisters with disabilities – who are born blind or deaf or with cognitive limitations, who develop disabilities during their middle years, or who acquire their impairments in their later years – can highlight the need for Jesus, the light of the world. One example appeared in his address during the Jubilee of Persons with Disabilities on Sunday, December 3, 2000:

In the kingdom of God – Christ reminds us – we experience a happiness that goes "against the tide" and is not based on success or well-being, but finds its profound reason in the mystery of the Cross.

God became man out of love; he wanted to share totally in our condition, choosing to be, in a certain sense, "disabled" in order to enrich us with his poverty (cf. Phil 2:6-8; 2 Cor 8:9).

We seek to be affirmed by worldly measures. And we receive that temporary affirmation for what we do, rather than for who we are: sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. While we were created to reflect some aspect of his plan for us, the world pushes us toward limited perception, dependant upon external appearances and functional abilities.

We read or hear that all we need to do to feel affirmed accepted, and self-confident is to exercise, eat right, and refrain from smoking or drinking. Yet our hearts are restless – somewhere deep within, we know that the body is frail. But we don't want to recognize that we are God's people – bent, feeble, blind, with many diseases and disabilities. Those among us who cannot disguise their fragility remind us of realities that sometimes seem too bitter to accept.

The utter truth is that we are disabled – all of us are disabled. Only God is able. Only God can create, give life, and give fruitfulness to our efforts. Our prayer and praise should come from the depths of our weakness and disabilities, not from any sense of completeness. In his first Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul admonishes us: "What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor 4:7).

In 1978, when the U.S. Catholic bishops first published their *Pastoral Statement on People with Disabilities*, they took pains to describe the prejudice that so often follows

a perception of difference – the “us versus them” mentality. Our bishops then proclaimed the commandment, “love your neighbor as yourself” as the corrective action for this perception of difference and its resulting prejudice: “We must love others from the inside out, so to speak, accepting their difference from us in the same way that we accept our differences from them” (no. 3).

Unfortunately, more than a quarter-century has elapsed since that statement was first promulgated, yet we still persist in seeing our brothers and sisters with disabilities very different – we still often have a vague sense that “guilt” is somehow involved with their physical or cognitive imperfections, as often evidenced in healing services. As a result, we fail to recognize the spiritual gifts that accompany acknowledgement of our shared vulnerability.

Our fear of and failure to recognize our own inabilities and our refusal to accept the fact that only God is able makes John’s story of the man born blind particularly relevant in a society that grows more utilitarian with each passing year. This event moves us beyond our common desire to escape recognition of our shared vulnerability; it moves us to a place where we can witness the wisdom to be found in our fragility. Truth eludes us if we continue in the darkness of sin and negative judgments of the gifts that each of God’s people, no matter their disabilities and impairments, bring into our world.

Let us not be like the Pharisees, who remained blind to their sins; let us take on the wisdom of those who wish to know and worship the Lord, recognizing the normal incompleteness of our human knowledge.

Jesus said to him, “You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “I do believe, Lord,” and he worshipped him. Then Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.” (Jn 9:37-39)

Note: The reading from John 9:1-39 is used in the Sunday Lectionary during the Lenten season and may be adapted for use during each of the three Lectionary cycles. Lent is a particularly fruitful time for parishioners to reflect upon the issues identified above, especially in connection with a collective examination of conscience.

### **Did you know?**

1. One in five Americans has a disability.
2. A third of all disabled Americans live at or near the poverty level.
3. The majority of those receiving the minimum food-stamp benefit of \$10 per month are people with disabilities whose health is in jeopardy due to lack of adequate nutrition.
4. Seventy percent of women with developmental disabilities will be sexually abused.
5. Children with disabilities are 200 percent more likely than other children to be physically or sexually abused.
6. More than half of all disabled college students are unemployed.

### **Homilies for Liturgical Feasts and Special Occasions**

You may wish to use the opportunity of a liturgical season or feast to promote disability awareness. Here are a few examples:

1. On Good Friday, the Church listens to Isaiah 53. Use this reading to reflect on the experience of the elderly and disabled in our society.

There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him.

He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity,

One of those from whom men hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem.

Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured, While we thought of him as stricken,

as one smitten by God and afflicted...  
(Is 53:1-4)

2. During the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, reflect on how Jesus manifests himself in human flesh, in all its dimensions, including various disabilities.
3. On December 3, 2000, in celebrating the Jubilee of the Disabled, John Paul II said,

The season of Advent...spurs us to prepare ourselves to welcome the Lord who will come...A concrete way to prepare ourselves...is by *closeness and sharing with those who, for whatever reason, are in difficulty*. By recognizing Christ in our brethren, we are preparing to be recognized by him at his final return. This is how the *Christian community prepares for the Lord's second coming: by focusing on those persons whom Jesus himself favored, those who are often excluded and ignored by society...By your presence, dear brothers and sisters, you reaffirm that disability is not only a need, but also and above all a stimulus and a plea. Of course, it is a request for help, but even before that it is a challenge to individual and collective selfishness, it is an invitation to ever new forms of brotherhood.*  
(nos. 4,5)<sup>1</sup>

4. Thanksgiving Day is a good time to highlight the gifts of God manifested in the diversity of the parish.
5. When we look at the lives of the saints, we are reminded of the role of human vulnerability in our lives. Can acceptance of the weakness of the human body enhance awareness of the power of our souls and our desire to join our Lord?

6. On feast days of specific saints, highlight the disabilities with which they are associated. Such examples not only give comfort to those who are experiencing similar challenges but also help "normalize" our shared vulnerability and highlight the gifts that accompany the fragility of our human bodies. If the liturgical calendar impedes delivering such a homily on a given saint's feast day (e.g., St. Lucia Filippini's feast day falls on the Solemnity of the Annunciation), consider holding a votive mass or prayer service on a different day to present the stories of such saints.

- St. Alphonsus Liguori used a wheelchair due to arthritis (August 1)
- St. Servulus's severe cerebral palsy prevented him from walking (December 23)
- St. Maximilian Mary Kolbe's tuberculosis almost killed him (August 14)
- Blessed Seraphine (also known as Fina) was unable to move her body (March 12)
- St. Giles (also known as Aegidius) lost mobility after sustaining a hunting injury to his leg (September 1)
- St. Ignatius of Loyola's significantly injured legs created difficulties in travel (July 31)
- Blessed Margaret of Castello's severe scoliosis, dwarfism, and blindness remind us of the spiritual gifts that can accompany a range of physiological challenges (April 13)
- St. Angela Merici (January 27) and St. Gerald of Aurillac (October 13) were also blind, and St. Lutgardis (June 16) wrote of the gift of the loss of her sight.

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[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/2000/documents/hf\\_jp\\_ii\\_hom\\_20001203\\_jubildisabled\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp_ii_hom_20001203_jubildisabled_en.html)

- St. Germaine Cousin (also known as Germana) was born with a deformed right hand and developed painful scrofula (June 15)
- The symptoms of tinnitus and dizziness that plagued St. Teresa of Avila would probably be diagnosed as Meniere's syndrome today (October 15)
- St. Alphais witnessed the loss of her limbs through leprosy (November 3)
- St. Lucia Filippini (also known as Lucy) suffered from many physical ailments before a painful death with cancer (March 25)
- Several saints were burdened with mental or emotional difficulties. St. Benedict Joseph Labre, who died while still searching for a religious community that would accept him, experienced mystical fits that some might today diagnose as mental or emotional disorders (April 16)
- A number of saints are known for their patronage of those who are deaf or hard of hearing, the most famous being St. Francis de Sales (January 24)

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*Taken from:*

*Opening Doors of Welcome and Justice to Parishioners with Disabilities: A Parish Resource Guide*

National Catholic Partnership on Disability