

Open Wide Our Doors to the Disabled

By Bishop Victor Galeone

"Mommy, look at that man! Why is he so different?" Children often ask their parents questions like that when they encounter a person with disabilities. In St. John's gospel, the disciples asked Jesus an even harsher question, when they came across the man born blind. (Jn 9:2) How should we treat those with disabilities? As we would treat Jesus himself: "As often as you did it to one of these least of mine, you did it to me." (Mt 25:40)

The Golden Rule is at the heart of the *Pastoral Statement of the United States Catholic Bishops on Handicapped People* published in 1978. This past April 30th, St. Catherine's Parish hosted a forum to discuss that pastoral statement, and I was fortunate enough to be one of the invitation and encouragement of Judy Bennett, who had just completed the Ministry Formation Program.

During her third-year practicum, she addressed the topic of inclusive parish communities for persons with disabilities. What a pity that there were not more people in attendance at the forum that evening! It's an area where we all need more enlightenment when it comes to meeting the needs of those who are in some way or other handicapped.

I'm very encouraged by the fact that all our new churches, recently dedicated or in the process of being built, are meeting the needs of those with disabilities - for example, by making the sanctuary handicapped accessible.

During the question period, a few participants asked me about the official diocesan policy on persons with disabilities regarding reception of the sacraments. Afterwards, a mother pointed out some of the hurdles she had to overcome before her handicapped son could receive first Holy Communion. Therefore, I would like to highlight some of the more salient points from the bishops' 1995 **Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities**, which our diocese follows.

Baptism: "Disability, of itself, is never a reason for deferring baptism. Persons who lack the use of reason are to be baptized provided at least one parent or guardian consents to it...if the person to be baptized is of catechetical age, the RCIA may be adapted according to need." (#9, 12)

Eucharist: "...the criterion for reception of holy communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental 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...Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament." (#20)

Confirmation: "...Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents or guardian, to receive the sacrament of confirmation at the appropriate time." (#16)

Reconciliation: "Only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing serious sin. Nevertheless, even young children and persons with mental disabilities often are conscious of committing acts that are sinful to some degree and may experience a sense of guilt and sorrow. 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." (#23)

I would like to close with a very important item from the Bishops' newly published National Directory for Catechesis: "Persons with disabilities should be integrated into ordinary catechetical programs as much as possible. Catechetical goals and objectives should be set for special students included in

parish catechesis. They should not be segregated for specialized catechesis unless their disabilities make it impossible for them to participate in the basic catechetical program." (p 207)