



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS
ON
DISABILITY**

Today is Mother's Day when our society pays tribute to mothers. Or at least it encourages families to do so. Today, all of us are encouraged to express our love for our mother, spoiling her for a change, for it is so often she who looks after everyone else. A mother's love is simply very precious. A mother's love is most often expressed in action. She gets things done and often keeps the rest of us on the straight and narrow. Today let each of us thank God for the one who is or has been our mother.

A mother's love, at its best, is a fine image and expression of the love of God. Today, in the Gospel, we see that love of God in action. Jesus, lifted on the cross, tells us that God's love is for all, without exception. Indeed, the only one who cannot be reached by this love of God is the one who 'refuses to believe', who puts himself or herself beyond its embrace.

St Paul makes the same message clear: 'This was to show for all ages to come how infinitely rich he is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift of God.' (Ephesians 2.7-8)

Today, I would like to apply this profound truth to one particular group: those who live with the experience of disability, of one kind or another. This is not a particularly small group. Indeed one in four people in this country is either disabled or close to someone who is. And please don't be thinking immediately of wheelchairs. Only 8% of disabled people have to use a wheelchair.

A mother's love doesn't distinguish between her children. A mother's love doesn't see a disability, but simply a loving and much loved child. This is true of fathers, too. A parent's love knows exactly what St Paul is talking about when he says, of each person, 'You are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.' (Ephesians 2.10)

So the challenge issued to us by a mother's love, and by the truth of our faith, is that we are to welcome and accept every person into our midst with that same steadfast love. Our faith is to be expressed in a loving openness to all. In this way it is a witness to God's love for all. So, at this time, I thank everyone, whether families or carers, who devote their time and love to those with special needs. Their example is an inspiration to us all.

Some time ago a listening exercise was conducted in the Diocese to find out what people with disabilities were saying about their experience of belonging to and participation in the life of the

Church. We learned that across the Diocese there is both much to celebrate and much still to be done. There were many examples of parishes and schools being enriched by the contribution of children and adults with disabilities in activities such as altar serving, music, welcoming and many more.

This is how it should be. Today we try not so much to do things for others, but to work with people with disabilities. Slowly we learn that if we fail to do this, then we are the weaker for it. It is the Church that is then disabled.

There are many examples that could be given of our progress in these matters. I want to mention just two.

Firstly a new effort is being made to try to ensure that Catholic children attending special schools receive regular religious education and preparation for the sacraments. We need to reach out to these children who are often forgotten or hidden. They need to be brought into our Eucharistic communities, together with their families.

I thank those who are involved in this work. Please support them with your prayers.

Secondly, you will be aware of the physical changes made in churches and halls to provide easier access for people with disabilities. We needed to do this. It was required by law. But really the example of Christ's love should be our true guide and law. So let us continue to think sensitively and creatively about how our communities can be more welcoming. What changes could we make in the way we do things in order to include every level of ability? Remember that those with disabilities tell us that the barrier which most often makes them feel unwelcome or excluded is that of peoples' attitude. This is something we can change.

One final thought. Our Church is well known for the stance we take on the value of every human life, from the first moment of conception to the moment of natural death. If we are to be consistent, this means that we must also make effort to ensure that every person has the best possible opportunity to develop in life and faith, no matter their ability, in both our schools and parishes.

When Pope John Paul made his historic visit to this country, this is what he said: 'Let us keep those with disabilities at the centre of our life. Let us treasure them and recognise with gratitude the debt we owe them. We begin by imagining that we are giving to them; we end by realising that they have enriched us.'

As we continue our journey of Lent, please remember these words and look out for opportunities to put them into practice. May the Lord bless us in and through our love for each other.

✠Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Birmingham

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and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the Fourth Sunday of Lent,
21/22 March 2009