

Title: Embracing the Journey: A Mother's Hope

Good afternoon, everyone,

My name is Hannah Evans and as you've just heard there, I have recently been appointed as the Coordinator for Catechetics, Evangelisation and Pastoral Renewal in the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference. Whilst my bio and CV reads many things, whether it be my work in Trócaire, my time as Programme Manager for the World Meeting of Families or my more recent stint as a Post Primary School Teacher, Today, I stand before you as a mother!

A mother—like many others—but with a story that is uniquely my own. My child has special needs, namely, she is autistic. It's a diagnosis that has shaped my life, my perspective, and my journey as a parent. But through it all, I choose hope.

When my daughter was first diagnosed, I was overwhelmed. There were so many questions, so many unknowns. I wondered what the future would look like for her, what challenges we'd face as a family, and what kind of supports we'd need. The world outside seemed full of uncertainty, and at times, it felt like I was walking through it alone.

I'd be lying if I didn't say I was angry too.....with the world, with God, with my family. Her initial diagnosis plunged me into the depths of fear, isolation and grief. Grief for the life I had hoped she would live but would now never have. My faith took a detour at this time also as desolation swept over me. I'd spend hours drawing comparisons with others. My friends and their young families, my daughters peers, or researching the latest medical or educational trends. Endless assessments, medical appointments and therapies (conventional and non) became part of our daily and weekly routines.

Recently, whilst attending a recent appointment with my daughter a therapist said to me "you're great for keeping it up, most people would have given up by now" (she was referring to a new therapeutic intervention we were discussing. My response shocked me as well as her.... "Most of these therapies are for me, not my child. They give ME hope and the drive to keep going."

Slowly, over time, I have begun to see things differently. Autism doesn't define my child, it's just a part of who she is—a part that makes her unique. I've come to realize that being a mother to an autistic child is not about fighting against something but rather embracing what is. It's about celebrating the small victories and finding joy in the moments that others might take for granted. Things that may be overlooked by neurotypical parents can be massive victories for parents of an autistic child. My husband and I once danced around our kitchen in delight after our daughter licked a piece of chicken for the first time at the age of 6.

As a mother, I've learned that hope is a practice. Some days are difficult, and some challenges are very hard to face. But every time my child makes a new connection, says a new word, or shows a new interest in something, my hope grows stronger. Every time I meet a new teacher or SNA that just 'gets her', my hope grows stronger. Every time she reaches a milestone (even after her peers), my hope grows stronger. Every time I hear of a new Special Needs Class being opened in our local area, my hope grows stronger. Every time she is invited to a birthday party by a peer and not left out because she is different, my hope grows stronger.

It's a hope rooted not in perfection, but in progress, in love, and in acceptance. Jesus offered us hope **not by his avoidance his suffering**, but by entering into it.... indeed leaning into it and that is the model which I too have chosen to follow.

My daughter has invited us into her world, and it is up to us to accept this offer, lean into it, and work alongside her to help her navigate her world, in her own way and in her own time.

To give you an example of this, she recently made her First Holy Communion. As you know, a big part of the day was learning and reciting the prayers and responses in the mass. My husband and I knew that the memorisation of this was going to be difficult for her, so we set about composing our own homemade sign-language to accompany the prayers. She would later not only be able to recite her prayers, but she would feel them and envision them in a way that none of her peers had experienced. By entering her world, we had begun to spiritually communicate as a family in a more meaningful manner than we could ever have hoped for. I want to show you this prayer.....

I've learned to appreciate the things that make my child shine—the way she sees the world so differently, the way she experiences joy in ways that are unique and pure and innocent. She has taught me the art of patience (not one of my fortes), resilience, and the true meaning of unconditional love. She is the living embodiment of all that Jesus called us to love.

The road may be challenging, but it's also filled with moments of beauty and growth. Children with additional needs are capable of much more than we sometimes realize. They can teach us profound lessons in humility, acceptance and hope.

I remain hopeful, not because the journey is always easy, but because I know that with every challenge comes an opportunity for personal growth, for spiritual connectivity, and for deeper understanding. And that hope is what carries me forward, every single day.