



hearts to one another and recognise the strengths of every person. Therefore, we should seek, in the first place, to ensure that persons with a disability and their families have every possible support that will allow them to respond to the needs and opportunities that arise for them in their local parish community.

lighting and the installation of ramps. We must reflect on the importance of making the liturgy more accessible to people with learning disabilities. In general, we need a greater consciousness of how everyone can be made welcome in our community, our rituals and our celebrations.

Jesus Christ invites all of us to share at the table of the Eucharist. Most parishes have made efforts to make their buildings more accessible and user-friendly, for example, through the provision of loop systems, the improvement of

This European Year of People with Disabilities is an opportune time to invite people with disabilities to give their views on how best they may become involved in all aspects of Church life and ministry. Do our prejudices restrict us in

recognising the giftedness of people with disabilities and the richness that their participation would bring to Church life?

- Are parish councils and committees representative of all?
- Are children and young people with disabilities welcomed and encouraged to participate in parish youth clubs and groups?
- Perhaps supportive networks could be developed at diocesan level to empower each local parish to be more inclusive of all.
- Could we make church and parish information available in as many

different formats as possible (Braille, large print, audio tape)?

Every human life is sacred because it is created in the image of God. In the Incarnation we see human life raised to a new level of sacredness, because each human being is invited to share in the glory that Jesus had with his Eternal Father before the world was made (Jn 17:24).

Through his ministry and life, Jesus invites us to share in this fullness of life.

Continuing the work of Christ, we as a Church community must ensure that all people are included and involved in the fullness and life of the Church.

Every human life is sacred because it is created in the image of God.

I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness.

(Jn 10:10)



Dublin Deaf Choir



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Photos: www.sportsfile.com; Mike Foulds and L'Arche Community; National Disability Authority and National Chaplaincy for Deaf People.

**Life
in all
its
fullness**

A letter from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference to mark the European Year of People with Disabilities and the Special Olympics World Summer Games June 2003



God knows each of us personally. He knew us before he formed us in our mothers' wombs (Jer 1:5); the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being are in his hand (Job 12:10). The beauty and wonder of God is revealed in every human person. Each person is created by God to fulfil a unique mission. His/her own special gifts are an irreplaceable part of the richness of God's image reflected in the human race.

Through the Incarnation, God gave the human person an even greater dignity. The Son of God has united himself with each individual; he is truly

one of us (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). In Baptism, he gives us a share in his life. Jesus' love for humanity should be reflected in our relationships with others. Every human person needs an environment of openness, acceptance, love and security in which to develop as God wishes us to do. St Paul reminds us that we are all parts of the same body and that each one of us has a different gift. (1 Corinthians 12:1-31) When each person is included and allowed to share his/her gifts, our Christian community is enriched.

This year, 2003, is European Year of People

Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make his home among them, they will be his people.

REV 21:3



with Disabilities, a designation which is significant and timely. This summer, we will welcome all the participants, their families, friends and supporters to the Special Olympics World Summer Games. The games are a magnificent symbol of what may be achieved when we focus on the abilities and skills of people rather than on their disabilities. The athletes will teach us much about motivation and determination and will bring enormous enjoyment to a worldwide audience. There could be no better advertisement

for the power of inclusion and participation.

While we celebrate the involvement of everyone connected with the Special Olympics World Summer Games, we remember that, for many people with disabilities, ordinary, everyday life is not always pleasant. There are, at present, an estimated 360,000 people living with a disability in Ireland. We read in the Disability Authority Act 1999 that a disability is 'a substantial restriction in the capacity of a person to participate in economic, social or cultural life on account of an enduring

physical, sensory, learning, mental health or emotional impairment'. Living with a disability may involve a sense of being different and, at times, a sense of exclusion. While a disability is a functional limitation, the degree of restriction a person experiences is determined by the environment and attitudes that they encounter.

People with disabilities may find great joy and fulfilment in the love of their families, carers and communities. However, families of people with disabilities can often experience isolation and rejection. Parents caring

for children with disabilities may, for instance, have to struggle to get appropriate education and support. They may worry about what their children's future will be after they finish school, and particularly after the parents themselves have died. It is important that we, as a Church community, acknowledge the innate value and unique mission of all our members. The Church community is not complete without those with disabilities. We must acknowledge their vocation and the invaluable role of parents, carers and all who

'We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.'

(NELSON MANDELA)



The heart of the Christian message is love.

advocate on their behalf to live full and fulfilled lives.

Thankfully, there is increased awareness around issues affecting people with disabilities and this has led to greater inclusion in society. However, we need to be constantly vigilant to make sure that our buildings and public transport system are accessible and to ensure that there is equal access to religious services, the sacraments, education, employment, housing,

public services and recreation. Equally important is the need to challenge attitudes that may blind us to the obstacles that exist. We need to learn to see things from the point of view of a person with a disability.

The heart of the Christian message is love. We can see from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry how people were drawn to him and how he understood them. Following the example of Jesus, we can open our