

Promoting Responsibility of Persons with Disabilities within a Renewed Theological Anthropology

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► ABSTRACT

The persons with disability (PwD) are typically not considered responsible participants in the life of the community: for too long they have been hidden within reductive narratives reflecting outdated and/or sentimental stereotypes that portray PwD as objects of care, concern, or even disregard, rather than agents of responsibility. The article takes note of “promoting” responsibility of PwD and affirm the capacity for responsibility of PwD, while also being mindful of responsibility’s developmental nature. Human responsibility is integral to respect for the dignity of every person, each created in the image of God that is foundational to Catholic social doctrine. This and its communal accountability will be the basis for suggesting an expanded narrative of the human person before God, that also considers why it has been elusive for PwD.

► KEYWORDS

Co-responsibility; Persons with Disability; Theological Anthropology; Synodality.

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This article is part of the larger focus of this journal on the co-responsibility of persons with disability (PwD)¹ in a synodal Church, because synodality depends on such collaboration by all women and men of good will. Very positively, this journal special edition declares PwD as co-responsible partners rather than posing it as a question.

The title of this article notes “promoting” responsibility of PwD and affirm the capacity for responsibility of PwD, while also being mindful of responsibility’s developmental nature. Human responsibility is integral to respect for the dignity of every person, each created in the image of God that is foundational to Catholic social doctrine. This and its communal accountability will be the basis for suggesting a renewed narrative of the human person before God, that also considers why it has been elusive for PwD.

1. Human Dignity - Human Responsibility

Human dignity, freedom, rights, and responsibilities are integrally linked and mutually informing, and therefore central to this conversation. Respect for human dignity in Catholic social doctrine is required because each person is created in the image of God. This is its foundational principle.² This provides rights to each person, freedom from coercion in matters of faith, and also for access to the things of a fully human life: food, clothing, a home, medical care, education, privacy, respect, love, friendships and other diverse relationships, intimacy, practicing one’s faith, gainful employment, participating in family, social and political life, exercising ones’ rights and responsibilities within community life, making decisions in one’s life, and even making mistakes.³ Yes, even making mistakes, because that is part of the learning process. Fear of making a bad decision undermines learning to make better ones.

The human responsibility to make informed decisions based on one’s conscience is the flip side of human rights. However, the Council Fathers of Vatican II noted that it is difficult for someone to truly follow their conscience if they lack access to these basic things that support human flourishing.⁴ Contrary to the staunch individualism of neoliberal society, Catholic social doctrine recognizes

¹ Persons with disabilities reflects the diversity within experiences of disability that “people” does not.

² Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, nn. 1-2, in W.M. ABBOTT (Ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II. Introductions and Commentaries by Catholic Bishops and Experts, Responses by Protestant and Orthodox Scholars*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 1966 [Reprint, 1989], 675-696.

³ Cf. *Ibidem*, nn. 1-8. Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (=GS), nn. 12, 23-28, 40, in A. FLANNERY (Ed.), *The Basic Sixteen Documents. A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language*, Costello Publishing Company - Dominican Publications, Northport, New York - Dublin, Ireland 1996, 163-282.

⁴ Cf. GS, n. 31.

that human beings are interdependent and social by nature, and «if [human beings] do not enter into relationships with others they can neither live nor develop their gifts».⁵ Therefore, every person *needs* to participate in community life, to develop one's potential, whatever that may be. The Church, collectively and individually, is obligated to support this

and... look upon his or her neighbor (without any exception) as another self, bearing in mind especially their neighbor's life and the means needed for a dignified way of life. ... Any offences against human life ... integrity ... and dignity ... are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the creator.⁶

These are stern words and this responsibility should not be taken lightly. Pope Benedict XVI reinforces such communal responsibility throughout *Caritas in Veritate* to support integral human development that is concerned with every person and the whole person. Human flourishing, however, is not an end in itself. It is the object of a person's vocation, which better enables them to responsibly live in the world, reflecting God's love into it, by their presence as well as actions. Substantiating this «involves a free assumption of responsibility in solidarity on the part of everyone».⁷ The free assumption of responsibility Benedict notes here has another very important insight often missed. Though professional services are important, human development does not flourish through interacting with people paid to be in their lives, but through voluntary relationships with friends.⁸

It is clear that making decisions, exercising responsibility, and having an informed conscience are interconnected, and is the responsibility of the community to support through access to the things of a fully human life and teaching principles to develop an informed conscience. The interplay of responsibility and freedom is described in the *Catechism*,

Freedom is exercised in relationship between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The *right to the exercise of freedom*, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by the civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order.⁹

It also clarifies limitations to responsibility spoken of by the Council fathers, that a person is responsible for their actions only to the extent that they are

⁵ GS, n. 12. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*, LEV, Washington, DC - Vatican City 2005/2004, nn. 34-37.

⁶ GS, n. 27.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)* (=CV), Kindle ed., United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - LEV, Washington, DC - Vatican City 2011, n. 11.

⁸ Cf. H.S. REINDERS, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids 2008. This is the central message of this seminal work on the intersection of theology and disability.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (=CCC), Second ed., United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC 2000/1997/1994, 1738; *emphasis added*. It cites *Dignitatis Humanae*.

done voluntarily and responsibility is mitigated if done out of «ignorance, inadvertence, [...] or other social factors...».¹⁰ These exceptions to responsibility will be an important part of this conversation, not to undermine the responsibility of PwD, but to explore the implied culpability of the community that does not fulfill its responsibility regarding this. In *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul II addresses responsibility, using some variation of the word 31 times. What I found particularly interesting is that he refers to communal responsibility significantly more often than personal responsibility, 23 to 8. This refers to the Church organizationally, collectively, as well as its individual members, are responsible for promoting the respect for the dignity of every person and working against injustice.¹¹

Fundamentally, respect for the innate dignity of every person includes positive expectations of growth and capacity. While that varies widely amongst people, everyone can learn and change when appropriately supported with reasonably high expectations. Neither ability, inability, nor disability diminishes human dignity.¹² Lacking such support or expectations, however, most PwD become used to being defined by what they cannot do, rather than what they *can* do. As a result of this and continually being marginalized with restricted access to experiences considered essential aspects of a fully human life, PwD can become socialized to believe nothing else is possible. Such experiences wound people emotionally and typically lead to a legacy of deep and lasting low expectations.¹³ And, it reveals a lack of positive growth expectations that inhibits human development.

There is an interesting comparison to consider in Pope John Paul II's charge against socialism. He said: «The denial of God deprives the person of their foundation and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility».¹⁴ Is it possible this statement posed as a question in reverse could challenge the practices of Western society? *Is a social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility founded on denial of God, particularly regarding marginalized persons, in this case PwD?* Here is the critical entry point for the question of community culpability regarding responsibility of PwD.

Pope Francis compares the experiences of PwD being othered well in *Fratelli Tutti* to that of "hidden exiles":¹⁵

Many persons with disabilities "feel that they exist without belonging and without participating" [...]. Our concern should be not only to care for them but to ensure their "active participation in the civil and ecclesial community [...]" that

¹⁰ CCC, 1734-1735.

¹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1 1991, LEV, Rome 1991, nn. 3, 13, 28, 31, 36, 42, 44, 46, 48, 51-53.

¹² Cf. GS, n. 29.

¹³ Cf. W. WOLFENSBERGER, *A Brief Overview of Social Role Valorization*, in «Mental Retardation» 38 (2000) 2, 105-123: 105-107.110-111.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 13.

¹⁵ Cf. FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti* on Fraternity and Social Friendship (=FT), October 3 2020, LEV, Vatican City 2020, n. 97.

will gradually contribute to the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person".¹⁶

He recognizes the attitudes and practices that marginalize PwD, even in the Church, and calls for concerted efforts to support their meaningful participation in it and society. It is noteworthy that this is not only because each person is created in the image of God, but also because it will demonstrate the capacity of PwD, which will change people's expectations of them. This is an important part of the process for change. Francis is clearly connecting the importance of identity and perceptions to foster not only human flourishing of marginalized persons, but also a more authentic ecclesiology, because how each person is perceived informs people's interactions with and actions regarding them. This framework is consistent with a constructive response proposed by social role valorization to the marginalization of PwD.¹⁷ It will be briefly characterized when discussing developmental nature of responsibility.

Belonging is a basic human need, which can only develop within community spaces with other people. To promote the felt experience of this will require an enlarged view of one's neighbor to include the entire human family, while still respecting and appreciating its diversity that is also a source of vitality and richness. Characterized by empathy, it is concerned with all that contributes to human flourishing for all people,¹⁸ because we are, after all, one human family living together on planet earth, our home. This has been a central message throughout Francis' papacy, however, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* together could be considered his thesis for a theological anthropology, and his call for synodality that for ecclesiology. It is fitting the first two came first because interpersonal and organizational behaviors are informed by mindsets and perceptions of people, which will then influence structures and practices of ecclesiology that is defined by synodality. Such is the purpose of this chapter, to provide insights for a renewed theological anthropology that reflects the diversity of the human family, while also respecting its unity without obscuring the differences. Relatedly, Francis says that creativity and interdependence thrive to the benefit of the common good when the dignity of every person, in their uniqueness and differences, is respected as co-responsible partners.¹⁹ This is also central to being a synodal

¹⁶ FT, n. 98.

¹⁷ Cf. A. MASTERS, *Who Do You Say That I Am? Overcoming the Marginalization of Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in the US Catholic Church*, Ph.D. Faculty of Theology and Religion, Vrije Universiteit 2020, <<https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/who-do-you-say-that-i-am-overcoming-the-marginalization-of-person>>; W. WOLFENBERGER, *Social Role Valorization: A Proposed New Term for the Principle of Normalization*, in «Mental Retardation» 21 (1983) 234-239. Reprinted in «Mental Retardation» 49 (2011) 6, 435-440; W. WOLFENBERGER, *A Brief Overview of Social Role Valorization*, in «Mental Retardation» 38 (2000) 2, 104-123.

¹⁸ Cf. C. GANGEMI, *Ways of Knowing God, Becoming Friends in Time. A Timeless Conversation between Disability, Theology, Edith Stein and Professor John Swinton*, in «Journal of Disability & Religion» 24 (2020) 3, 332-347: 339.

¹⁹ Cf. FT, nn. 22, 35, 77, 86, 95-100.

Church – one that is infused with a spirituality for synodality which informs attitudes and practices.²⁰

Such a narrative infused with a spirituality for synodality could promote an environment for PwD to flourish as co-responsible partners in the Church.²¹ Sister Veronica Donatello was hopeful that the collaborative engagement as a synodal Church during the conference “‘Us’ NOT ‘Them’” could initiate a rubric for a “new grammar of being Church”. This is an exciting prospect indeed, but one that will require intentionality and an openness to the promptings of the Spirit. In light of this, it will be helpful to first reconsider the manifestations of the Spirit as proposed by Paul in his metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ.

2. Who are ‘We’? – One Body in Christ: Theological Anthropology and Ecclesiology

Paul provides a rich metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ in 1Cor 12 that provides a scriptural landscape for this project, to reconsider the identity and dynamics of body of Christ. Are there insights to be gained for the renewed identity of this project. Who is the “we” as the body of Christ? And how is this “we” as the body of Christ to live its mission? These are integrally linked and will be very helpful to consider. There is a tendency to focus on a finite list of seven *gifts* of the Spirit for individuals to share with the Church that prepares them for the twelve fruits, which fuel and signify a deeper life in the Spirit.²² The concern is this also presents the activities of the Spirit as something which occur within people in “possession of the Spirit”,²³ inadvertently emphasizing the individual person as agent, and problematically valorizes independence and disavows the interdependent nature of the body. This then marginalizes individuals who are more visibly vulnerable and dependent.

Brian Brock, a Christian theologian who writes at the intersection of disability, theology, and ethics and is the father of a teenage boy with autism, challenges this typical reading of 1Cor 12. He makes a compelling case that Paul was focused on the entirety of the body of Christ, in which many manifestations of the Spirit occur within the interpersonal relational activities that becomes the body of Christ.²⁴ In other words, the activities of the Spirit occurs within the interpersonal spaces of its members, rather than within individual persons. Brock rightly chastises self-referential questions that focus on one’s own gifts because

²⁰ Cf. FRANCIS, *Laudato Si’ on Care for Our Common Home*, Melville House Publishing-LEV, Brooklyn 2015, nn. 65–66; FT, nn. 6, 8, 22, 34–35.

²¹ Cf. A. MASTERS, *A Spirituality for Synodality–Hope for Persons with Disabilities?*, in «Spiritus» 23 (2023) 1, 78–100. I suggest if a spirituality for synodality takes root, then PwD should be expected to be respected as integral members of the body of Christ. The title ends with a question mark, because experience has taught us that proclamations of belief does not necessarily translate into the expected practices.

²² Cf. CCC, nn. 1830–1832, 1298, 1299, 1303.

²³ Cf. J.A. FITZMYER, *Pauline Theology*, in R.E. BROWN – J.A. FITZMYER – R.M. MURPHY (Eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ 1968, 1382–1416.

²⁴ Cf. B. BROCK, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas 2019, 262–267.

they are contrary to God's way and undermine openness to the activity of the Spirit. The better question, he says is, «how, here and now, do I embrace the giving of the Spirit?».²⁵ Brock also argues the emphasis on individual gifts marginalizes those who are more precariously vulnerable and dependent. Further, when PwD are considered valuable for their gifts to the Church, he says their "gifts" are typically defined by their disability, and restricted to predefined spaces, often as objects of service for others, and/or patronized with minimal expectations.²⁶

Three particular areas of interest surfaced while studying Brock's work that can contribute to this project: manifestations of the Spirit vs. individual gifts, diversity in unity vs. uniformity, and identifying the weak members. Paul introduces the metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ to provide a theological anthropology that reflects the diversity of the human family.

Manifestations of the Spirit vs. Gifts: Scripture scholar Gordon Fee says Paul is focused on the Spirit and the body as a whole to emphasize the plethora of ways God's activity is made known through the embodiments of the one Spirit, for the benefit of the common good, rather than to provide a finite list of gifts (1Cor 12,4-11).²⁷ The different kinds of gifts, service and work, are all from the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God, and gifts are not individual achievements, but are considered gifts because they benefited the community at large.²⁸ The shared experience in the Spirit is the starting point, and what differentiates the Church from a typical and hierarchically ordered political body (12-14). Through this they become one body, which consists of many interdependent members, who do not lose their uniqueness, yet the old labels have lost their distinctions of status.²⁹ Though Paul was referring to culture and class references, the message is equally valid today.

The possibilities for the embodiment of God's Spirit in the Church are limitless when members come together as an interdependent communion, and alternatively limited by exclusive and marginalizing practices.³⁰ Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ for the Church, based on the workings of the human body, portrays an interdependent communion of members animated by the manifestations of the Spirit. Tending to the common good lifts up the body, and all are enhanced, whereas focusing on individual giftedness points away from Christ and restricts the actions of the Spirit.³¹ Its interdependence, we shall see, depends on the diversity of its members.

"Diversity in Unity" Rather than Uniformity: Valuing diversity is critical for the functional unity of the body of Christ, rather than erasing differences for uniformity (15-20). Fee says Paul was specifically chastising the Corinthian

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 268.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 254-255, 275-278.

²⁷ Cf. G.D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Revised Edition ed., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI 2014/1987, 647-665.

²⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, 631-636, 645-654, 667.

²⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*, 665-673.

³⁰ Cf. BROCK, *Wondrously Wounded*, 255.

³¹ Cf. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 647-665, 651 fn 85.

Church for marginalizing those who were not able to speak in tongues or prophecy, because all become one body in the Spirit.³² As this shared experience in the one Spirit is the foundation for membership in the body of Christ, being created in the image of God is the foundation for human dignity of all persons.

Importantly, diversity isn't an end in itself, but required for the functionality of the one body that God has designed; a body of all eyes or all ears could not function. However, Paul is actually concerned more with prioritizing of people, rather than gifts. He is specifically challenging the wealthy members of the Church, who's arrogance has decided that some members are not necessary.³³ This is indicated by the problem he addresses right before, their divisive practices when gathering as a Church at the Lord's Table (11,17-34). Remember that the Church in Corinth was a mixture of Gentile and Jewish Christians, and Christian Judaism was not an officially recognized religion. So, gatherings for Eucharist were in homes of wealthy residents, and prone to influences from Roman culture.³⁴

Who Are the Weak? Although there is general acceptance of Paul's metaphor as an interdependent communion of members, Fee provides important consideration for Paul's meaning of the "weak" members (21-26), which he insists is pure analogy, and not an allegory that refers to marginalized groups. All people are equally valued despite appearances. The body of Christ is a metaphor, to drive home there should be no divisions, reinforcing the analogy that refers to people rather than gifts.³⁵ The inner organs are weaker, requiring the protection of the skeleton and other parts of the body, but they are no less important or capable. In the political fable that inspired Paul, the ears, eyes, and limbs of a human body conspire against the *apparently* freeloading stomach, only to discover too late its important function!³⁶

Subject and Verb in the New Grammar of the Body of Christ: To summarize, Paul tells them that love is the most excellent way (12,27-13,1). As such this provides context for the manifestations of the Spirit, which are not gifts in themselves. They are the foundation of all and necessary for the building up of the body that is defined by such compassionate openness of all its members to each other, sharing in the joy and suffering of any member (24-26).³⁷ Therefore, there should be no marginalized members within the body of Christ, consistent with expectations within practices of synodality.³⁸

³² Cf. *Ibidem*, 665-673.

³³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 663-678.

³⁴ For a more detailed discussion read J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, Third Revised and Expanded Edition ed., Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2002, 6-8, 78-81, 177, 185.

³⁵ Cf. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 675-682.

³⁶ Cf. IDEM, *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ*, online ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2006, <<https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/folder?vid=20&sid=cc99c20f-0cf1-4cfb-9a16-e34948e586f5%40redis>>.

³⁷ Cf. IDEM, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 688-692, 679-682.

³⁸ Cf. COMMISSION INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL, *Synodality in the Life of the Church*, March 2 2018, Rome: Vatican, n. 108.

In fact synodality requires the full diversity of the body of Christ to be engaged, «differences become the ‘material’ by which we live as a whole community and one body».³⁹ This echoes Paul’s admonishments to the Church in Corinth and has hopes that an outcome will be the ability to actually do this and share this capability beyond its own boundaries, enabling us «to learn together how to strengthen our mutual and global bonds, not *in spite* of our differences but *in and through* these differences».⁴⁰

The new subject is manifestations, rather than gifts, and the new verb is the ongoing activities of the Spirit *between* rather than *within* members. Tom Reynolds, a jazz musician, theologian, and father of a man with autism, provides a provocative metaphor of jazz for the manifestations of the Spirit in the body of Christ. As the Spirit manifests itself within the interpersonal spaces *between* members of the body, like musicians in a jazz band, they are each different, but important. In the interplay of notes on a sheet of paper, in the call and response amongst and between the musicians, jazz happens, bringing forth something new!⁴¹ Jazz provides a metaphor for the creative and lifegiving essence of the embodiments of the Spirit that does whatever it wills.⁴² Such leads to uncountable ways of participating and living as the body of Christ!

3. Naming and Belonging

The same dynamics that devalue groups of people that causes them to be marginalized in Paul’s day are the same as today. Language and imaging have a circular relationship with mindsets. Mindsets inform language and imaging used to talk about and represent people, and these then reinforce and perpetuate mindsets, expanding their reach, for good or ill. Despite the foundational principles that affirm the innate dignity of every person because each is created in the image of God and all this entails, without specifically naming the full diversity of the human family within an articulated theological anthropology, general ecclesial documents are received as applying to people of the normative culture, requiring separate documents to be promulgated to name their application to marginalized groups.⁴³ This is why *Fratelli Tutti* is important. Francis speaks about PwD in a general encyclical on the concerns of all humanity. To be named

³⁹ COMMISSION ON SPIRITUALITY, *Toward a Spirituality for Synodality*, June 18 2022, <https://www.synodresources.org/resource_post/249643/>, 16-17.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Cf. T.E. REYNOLDS, *Improvising Together: Christian Solidarity and Hospitality as Jazz Performance*, in «Journal of Ecumenical Studies» 43 (2008) 1, 45-66: 39-43, 47-50.

⁴² Cf. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 654-673.

⁴³ Regarding PwD in the US Catholic Church key documents are: USCCB, *Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities*, USCCB, Washington, DC 1978, <https://ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/pastoral-statement-us-catholic-bishops-persons-disabilities>; IDEM, *Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, DC June 16 1995; IDEM, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework of Access and Inclusion*, USCCB, Washington, DC 1998; IDEM, *Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities Revised Edition*, USCCB, Washington, DC June 2017.

is to be seen, and Francis is naming persons with disabilities, their innate dignity, wounds, and capacity.

Mary Doak succinctly identifies the problem and purpose for this project:

If a truly human life is one lived in communities enriched by and supportive of the diversity that is integral to humanity, then this ongoing work in theological anthropology has much to contribute to overcoming the tribal divisions and the growing individualism that distort not only society but also the church.⁴⁴

Doak understands the importance of a theology of the human person that reflects the *corporeal*, *contextual*, and *communal* aspects of human experience within specific locations of place and history. Otherwise, tribal divisions and marginalization will continue based on a narrow understanding of the human person before God that is heavily influenced by cultural norms and which historically privilege the experiences of white, Euro-American, socially entitled men.⁴⁵

The tribalism Doak refers to prioritizes who is valued in a society and who is not. It supports internal group cohesion by defining who is an outsider, which contributes to the process of building community and culture, and guides resource sharing and protective practices. This explains the experience of PwD as “hidden exiles” Pope Francis describes, and is also consistent with my research to understand the persistent marginalization of PwD in the US Catholic Church. Despite positive affirmations to the innate dignity of PwD, they are often obscured within a collective narrative I named the shadow narrative, because they are hidden within its shadow, eclipsing the light of the Gospel, while seeming to animate it. The two most common threads see PwD as forever children or objects of charity, eliciting Christ-like attitudes and actions in others.⁴⁶ The threads of the *shadow narrative* are a subset of narratives that have supported this process from the early days of human society. These narratives express empathic feelings for members of one’s own group, offspring, clan and others or conversely, denies empathic feelings for outsiders, those not in one’s tribe, and therefore who one cannot afford to feel empathy for. Psychologists tell us that these processes of empathy are unconscious and have been part of human evolution.⁴⁷ In other words, it is wired into us as a species for survival, which makes it particularly resistant to change.

⁴⁴ M. DOAK, *Sex, Race, and Culture: Constructing Theological Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century*, in «Theological Studies» 80 (2019) 3, 508-529: 509.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Cf. A. MASTERS, *Considering a Case for Rights and Charity*, in «International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church» 22 (2022) 1, 58-74: 62-69. I discuss the shadow narrative, its genesis and the problematic developments in the practice of charity in more detail here.

⁴⁷ Cf. J. ZAKI, *Empathy: A Motivated Account*, in «Psychological Bulletin» 140 (2014) 6, 1608-1634: 1608-1614. Research has demonstrated its unconscious nature by biological indicators in brain scans during subjects’ empathic activities. Studies also indicate that specific empathic inclinations respond over time to changing needs of a group based on shifting dynamics of society. Further, contrary to previous understanding, someone’s capacity for empathy is not fixed and can be developed. This information has led to helpful research to support autistic individuals to develop empathic capacity, which contradicts previous expectations.

Empathy is the key to breaking through the tribal borders that separate, marginalise, insulate, and oppress. Authentic practice of empathy, feeling with people, is particularly important for this project to overcome the devaluation of PwD that leads to their marginalization and fosters connection between people.⁴⁸ Sympathy on the other hand, separates people, feeling 'for' rather than 'with', and judges the other person.⁴⁹ In *Caritas in Veritate* Pope Benedict XVI stresses the importance of a truth in charity that views the person in their fullness, as well as charity in truth, which sees with the eyes of love. This is a great example of empathy. Such charity in truth can support human development.⁵⁰

Having explored the importance of clearly naming who is included in a theological anthropology, next I will propose ideas in which experiences of disability is named and not stigmatized that reflects the breadth of embodied, contextual living, and support expectations of the responsibility of PwD rooted in human dignity.

4. A Theological Anthropology Inclusive of Disability

Drawing on the work of many theologians from marginalized groups, Doak says that contextual considerations of a person's embodied, lived experience is essential: «[Persons] are formed in their understandings of themselves, their lives, and their religion by their cultural-linguistic frameworks».⁵¹ Therefore, a coherent theological anthropology needs to reflect the human family in its full contextual, communal, and embodied diversity. This will also provide a foundation in which PwD recognize themselves and are recognized by others.

In "Including All Bodies in the Body of God," Deborah Creamer helps theology reflect the diverse experiences of embodiment. She says that limits are a common aspect of humanity and therefore should not be negativized. Limitation and limitedness carries negative associations, but alternatively "limits" and "limitness", Creamer says, «problematizes our notion of normal while also encouraging us to think about the particularity of bodies and how these particularities might affect theological reflection».⁵² This also notes that the spectrum of difference is characteristic of the human family. Doak similarly says that embodiment cannot escape limits of any kind, so an authentic theological anthropology must address the issues raised by ableism which marginalizes PwD.⁵³

Limits and contextual implications are also part of the understanding of disability experiences developed by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF). Disability results from interactions among different factors: a diagnosed health condition, its symptoms, activity limits and expectations, and contextual factors from the environment and the person, all of

⁴⁸ Cf. GANGEMI, *Ways of Knowing God*, 339.

⁴⁹ Cf. B. BROWN, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*, Kindle ed., Random House 2018, 136-153.

⁵⁰ Cf. CV, nn. 17, 30.

⁵¹ DOAK, *Sex, Race, and Culture*, 523.

⁵² D. CREAMER, *Including All Bodies in the Body of God*, in «Journal of Religion, Disability & Health» 9 (2006) 4, 55-69: 64.

⁵³ Cf. DOAK, *Sex, Race, and Culture*, 523.

which impact the person's ability to participate in community and life activities. Such activities include going to worship, school, and work, to name only a few examples. Environmental contextual factors include the physical environment such as room layout and entrance access, attitudes, and ways of doing things. Personal contextual factors refer to a person's capacities, interests, motivations, and resources.⁵⁴

The ICF model presumes disability is part of a continuum of health, disability, and functioning. Therefore, disability is considered something that is present "more or less" instead of "yes or no".⁵⁵ Justin Glyn, SJ, a priest, canon lawyer, and theologian who is blind, differentiates between his impairment – optic nerve damage – and his disability, which results from the interactions between his impairment and both social and physical environments.⁵⁶ The important point here is the role of contextual factors in experiences of disability, which can be changed and thus decrease them, or unhelpfully, increase them. Contextual factors that increase access to such participation, decrease experiences of disability, and are supports or supportive strategies. It is important to clarify that supports are not needs, they provide access to needs. Some examples of supports are ramps, stairs, braille, printed text, audio, pictures, symbols, words, differentiated instruction, supported decision-making to name a few.

As this discussion unfolds, it is becoming clear that even the understanding of "normal" is not static. Disability scholar Thomas Shakespeare cautiously notes the implications of the Human Genome Project that challenges a specific understanding of "normal", while not homogenizing experiences of impairment and disability.⁵⁷ However, it seems safe to say, as others have, that difference is a unifying characteristic of the human family.⁵⁸

The Shadow Side of 'We': While recognizing what is shared is important for developing relatability and concern for each other, it is important also to hold onto diverse identities within a community, particularly for individuals from marginalized groups. There is a tendency to emphasize the shared human condition of vulnerability to foster a sense of connection between persons with and without disabilities. However, this is problematic for at least two reasons. The first is grounded in the thin understanding of vulnerability as «capable of being physically or or emotionally wounded, open to attack or damage».⁵⁹ In other words, vulnerability emphasizes weakness, which is devalued within societies that valorize concepts such as independence, wealth, knowledge, and strength.

⁵⁴ Cf. WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, AND THE WORLD BANK, *World Report on Disability*, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland 2011, 3-5.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 5.

⁵⁶ Cf. J. GLYN, *'Us' Not 'Them': Disability and Catholic Theology and Social Teaching*, Kindle ed., Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Alexandria, NSW 2019, 125.

⁵⁷ Cf. T. SHAKESPEARE, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*, 2nd ed., Kindle ed., Routledge, New York 2014, 87.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. SWINTON, *From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness*, in «Journal of Religion, Disability & Health» 16 (2012) 2, 172-190: 179.

⁵⁹ *Vulnerable*, in Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulnerability>>.

The process of devaluing and marginalizing characteristics, and thus the individuals and groups of peoples who have them, is explained by the “cult of normalcy”, a term coined by Tom Reynolds. In his book *Vulnerable Communion*, Reynolds explains the process of marginalization which is very much informed by forces of tribalism discussed above.⁶⁰ In Western society, characteristics associated with disability are not only devalued, but avoided by many, resulting in the avoidance of PwD that explains their experiences of being hidden exiles.⁶¹ Trying to force acceptance of vulnerability onto people will not advance the appreciation of them as persons of interest and integral members of the body of Christ. This is borne out by research into problems with diversity, equity, and inclusion training. In particular, blaming and shaming members of the normative culture is shown to reinforce tribalistic resistance, rather than diminish it.⁶²

Second, and perhaps more importantly, this does not recognize the increased vulnerability of marginalized persons because of contextual factors defined by the cult of normalcy. This increased vulnerability is more correctly referred to as precarity.⁶³ Conflating vulnerability with precarity denies the impact on people’s lives from such devaluation and marginalization. Further, emphasizing commonality without also recognizing distinctions only promotes a false sense of unity that obscures differences, typically leaving sources of precarity intact.⁶⁴ Recalling the discussion of 1Cor 12, it denies the ontological necessity of diversity in the body of Christ.

There is a further reason for caution, to pause and assess one’s own motivations. Is the motivation based on one of the threads of the shadow narrative? In *I Believe in You*, Luca Badetti cautions for the need to explore one’s own marginalized self, one’s own ‘shadow side’ before accompanying people who have been marginalized. Doing so increases self-awareness and should mitigate against unconscious instrumental use.⁶⁵

Incorporating limits and embodied particularities into a common understanding of the human person can do much to overcome marginalizing perceptions of PwD. But one more point must be clarified before a constructive account of responsibility of PwD can gain traction. While all human beings, nay all embodied creatures, are vulnerable, this is not the basis for respect for human dignity. Respect for the dignity of every person is required because every person is created in the image of God. While there is secular support internationally that affirms respecting human dignity, there are some who discount the humanity of people with profound physical and/or intellectual disabilities and disagree that

⁶⁰ Cf. T. REYNOLDS, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, particularly 46-70.

⁶¹ Cf. ZAKI, *Empathy*, 1608-1612.

⁶² Cf. C. CHAVEZ – J.Y. WEISINGER, *Beyond Diversity Training: A Social Infusion for Cultural Inclusion*, in «Human resource management» 47 (2008) 2, 331-350: 331-335.

⁶³ Cf. J.F. KEENAN, *The World at Risk: Vulnerability, Precarity, and Connectedness*, in «Theological studies» 81 (2020) 1, 132-149.

⁶⁴ Cf. J.F. DOVIDIO et alii, *Included but Invisible? Subtle Bias, Common Identity, and the Darker Side of “We”*, in «Social Issues and Policy Review» 10 (2016) 1, 6-46.

⁶⁵ Cf. L. BADETTI, *I Believe in You*, Revised ed. Hyde Park, New City Press, New York 2021, 102.

all human life is of equal value.⁶⁶ This leaves PwD at risk to subjective valuations by others. As Francis persuasively argues in *Fratelli Tutti*, faith communities have the potential and responsibility, to work for the real participation of PwD. In short, faith communities can embody what they profess and become leaven for society.

5. Responsibility of PwD in a Synodal Church

Promoting the responsibility of PwD begins with every person being part of a shared narrative in which persons with and without disabilities recognize themselves and each other. Supporting meaningful and engaged participation enhances individual and communal flourishing. Supporting human development should begin at birth and continue throughout life in different ways. However, growth is always possible even with a late start, if framed within positive expectations, caring relationships, and taking advantage of evidence based practices. Learning from the social sciences was an important instinct of the Second Vatican Council. While fully exploring this will be the subject of another article, I would feel remiss without at least pointing to helpful sources.

As more is learned about the capacity of individuals with disabilities to develop and learn, respect for human dignity takes on new requirements to support what I would call its “growing end,” similar to the “growing end” of tradition. The growing end of human dignity has progressed from basic physical care (recall the inhuman institutionalization as recently as the 1970’s) to include security and emotional needs such as intimacy, relationships, and trust, which in turn focuses upon education, respect, employment, and growth expectations that develop potentiality and transcendence through exercising rights, contributing to community, feeling connected to something beyond oneself, making decisions in one’s life, and even taking risks and making mistakes. Keeping up with the growing end of human dignity requires reassessing practices. What were once leading-edge evidence-based practices can quickly become outdated and hamper flourishing, rather than promote it.

Recall that Pope Francis stressed changing people’s expectations of PwD would come through direct experiences with PwD, demonstrating their diverse abilities and capacity for growth. This is consistent with the principles of social role valorization by Wolf Wolfensberger I noted earlier. It emphasizes the importance of social engagement through valued social roles, which help someone develop other roles, expanding their identity and relationships. Importantly, it is not a complex system, but rather preferences doing things in ordinary ways within natural relationships as much as possible. Begin with seeing the person before you, have positive expectations of capacity and development when appropriately supported with reasonably high expectations, which is a developmental

⁶⁶ Cf. P. SINGER, *Speciesism and Moral Status*, in «Metaphilosophy» 40 (2009) 3/4, 567-581.

framework.⁶⁷ In fact, Wolfensberger's influence is discernible in the *US Pastoral Statement* in numerous places.⁶⁸

All skills require practice to develop and refine. Exercising responsibility in one's life is a skill that includes learning what is right and wrong and the ability to make decisions cognizant of this. Therefore, being responsible and making decisions are both skills to be learned and developed. This includes opportunities to learn from bad decisions, preferably within a supportive environment that respects this. The more opportunities someone has, the better equipped they will become, even if they will require some level of support throughout their life. Robert Perske, a contemporary of Wolfensberger, challenged the «clever ways of building the avoidance of risk into the lives» of PwD that stunted their personal development, and indeed, which he said was a «dehumanizing indignity in safety».⁶⁹ In fact, overprotection and lack of appropriate opportunities to stretch one's abilities stifle human flourishing and put PwD at higher risk of violence and poverty. Children and teens with IDD are four times as likely to be bullied; teens and adults with IDD are four times as likely to experience physical and sexual violence; PwD are three times as likely to live in poverty and employed one third as much as people without disabilities.⁷⁰

The work of Wolfensberger and Perske made a significant impact on human service systems, contributing much to what is now part of person-centered planning that seeks to increase the quality of life of PwD by promoting engaged participation in community life in ordinary ways. Principles of their work are incorporated into practices such as inclusive post-secondary education for students with intellectual disability, supported employment, supported decision-making, contextual planning to increase quality of life, and LifeCourse planning.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Cf. W. WOLFENSBERGER, *The Origin and Nature of Our Institutional Models*, Human Policy Press, Syracuse, NY 1975, 23-33; W. WOLFENSBERGER et alii, *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services*, National Institute on Mental Retardation, Toronto 1972. Wolfensberger was a contributing author on this subject for the President's Commission on Mental Retardation, W. WOLFENSBERGER - R. KUGEL (Eds.), *Changing Patterns in Residential Services for the Mentally Retarded*, The President's Committee on Mental Retardation, Washington, DC 1969; WOLFENSBERGER, *Social Role Valorization*.

⁶⁸ Cf. USCCB, *US Pastoral Statement*, 1989, nn. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8-11, 13, 14-17, 24, 26.

⁶⁹ R. PERSKE, *The Dignity of Risk and the Mentally Retarded*, in «Mental Retardation» 10 (1972) 1 24-27. Reprinted <http://robertperske.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The_Dignity_of_Risk.pdf>, 1-6: 5-6.

⁷⁰ Cf. J.J. BLAKE et alii, *National Prevalence Rates of Bully Victimization among Students with Disabilities in the United States*, in «School Psychology Quarterly» 27 (2012) 4, 210-222: 210; J.R. PETERSILIA, *Crime Victims with Developmental Disabilities: A Review Essay*, in «Criminal Justice and Behavior» 28 (2001) 6, 655-694; J. WINSOR et alii, *StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes through 2017*, Institute for Community Inclusion (UCEDD) University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA 2019, <https://www.statedata.info/sites/statedata.info/files/files/bluebook2019_Final.pdf>.

⁷¹ Cf. THINK COLLEGE NATIONAL COORDINATING CENTER, *Think College*, Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass, Boston 2017/2021, <<https://thinkcollege.net/>> ("Think College" is a national initiative dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving research and practice in inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disability. It is based at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston); B. GAVENTA et alii, *Putting Faith to*

Closing

In the body of Christ, there should be positive expectations of capacity paired with patience for different paces. Remember, the body is responsible for supporting the flourishing of each member, including the capacity to make moral decisions and exercise responsibility in their life. Not paying attention to the capacity of PwD to learn and grow is like pouring the new wine of the growing end of human dignity into the old wineskin of the charity and medical models of disability (*Mt 9,17*). Without ability to expand or support growth, the wineskin bursts. It is a matter of justice as people of faith and incumbent upon the Church to support the growing participation and capacity of PwD in the experiences of a fully human life noted above.⁷² To not do so abdicates the Church's communal responsibility as argued above. Stated another way, when the Church engages with PwD in any way based on stereotypic expectations defined by low expectations and diagnostic labels, it denies their dignity; it denies the full implications of their being created in the image of God; it denies their vocation to flourish and reflect the image of God into the world as responsible partners within the body of Christ.

Overcoming the felt experience of "hidden exile", that Pope Francis describes requires a renewed theological anthropology that includes *all* people and recognizes limits and contextual realities of embodied existence. A synodal church rightly affirms it is through our differences we become whole and drawn into communion that presumes real concern for each other.⁷³ Promoting empathy, the capacity to relate to the emotions and experiences of PwD is critical, because the shadow narrative obscures PwD as *other* in its cast. Someone may not know what it is like to be Autistic, have Down Syndrome, or be blind. But everyone knows what it feels like to feel totally out of place, be known for what you can't do, to be appreciated, to be valued, loved, and needed. This is also an important implication of understanding who *we* are as the body of Christ. *We* are all part of one human family defined by diversity, of which disability is one dimension.

The *new grammar* of being Church is well served by the metaphor of jazz for the interpersonal manifestations of the Spirit. It inspires a spirituality *for* synodality in which being open to the promptings of the Spirit is an ontological aspect of the "life 'beyond' of the Spirit", moving the Church beyond itself, in a

Work: The Call and Opportunity for Faith Communities to Transform the Lives of People with Disabilities and Their Communities, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center: UCEDD, Kentucky, LA 2014; K.A. SHOGREN et alii, *Supported Decision Making: A Synthesis of the Literature across Intellectual Disability, Mental Health, and Aging*, in «Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities» 52 (2017) 2, 144-157; K.A. SHOGREN et alii, *Development of the Supported Decision Making Inventory System*, in «Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities» 55 (2017) 6, 432-439; K.A. SHOGREN - R. LUCKASSON - R.L. SCHALOCK, *The Responsibility to Build Contexts That Enhance Human Functioning and Promote Valued Outcomes for People with Intellectual Disability: Strengthening System Responsiveness*, in «Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities» 56 (2018) 4, 287-300; *Nexus, Charting the LifeCourse*, <<https://www.lifecoursetools.com/>>.

⁷² Cf. GS, nn. 11-32.

⁷³ Cf. COMMISSION ON SPIRITUALITY, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 16-17.

dynamic and mutually unfolding of communion, participation, and mission.⁷⁴ In such a body, each member shares in responsibility for the whole and is valued as an integral member.

Promuovere la responsabilità delle persone con disabilità in un'antropologia teologica rinnovata

► SOMMARIO

Le persone con disabilità (PcD) non sono in genere considerate soggetti responsabili nella vita della comunità: per troppo tempo sono state nascoste all'interno di narrazioni riduttive che riflettono stereotipi obsoleti e/o sentimentali che ritraggono le PcD come oggetti di cura, preoccupazione o addirittura disprezzo, piuttosto che protagonisti con responsabilità. L'articolo rileva la responsabilità "progredita" delle PcD e afferma la loro capacità di assumerne il carico, pur nella consapevolezza della natura evolutiva della responsabilità. La responsabilità umana è parte integrante del rispetto della dignità di ogni persona, ciascuna creata in quell'immagine di Dio che è fondamentale per la dottrina sociale cattolica. Questo e la sua responsabilità comunitaria saranno la base per suggerire una narrazione ampliata della persona umana davanti a Dio, che consideri anche perché è risultata meno definita per la PcD.

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Antropologia teologica; Corresponsabilità; Persona con Disabilità; Sinodalità.

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⁷⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 13-15.