

**In pursuit of Masterpieces:
The role of the priest in helping those with developmen-
tal disabilities reach their potential as God has defined it**

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► **ABSTRACT**

The article examines the role of a priest in empowering persons with developmental disabilities, with a firm conviction that each one is called to be a Masterpiece of God, as God intends them to be. Beginning with outlining the prevalence of developmental disabilities such as autism, intellectual disability, down syndrome, the article goes on to draw inspiration from the Gospel model of Jesus' inclusive ministry, from where it establishes the necessity of the protagonism in this regard on the part of the clergy, to whom the responsibility of realising and building up an ecclesial community of participation and shared ministry. Attempting a proactive critique on the present seminary programme and formation model, the article places on record the emerging exigencies in this regard, that have to be reflected upon seriously and also makes some concrete proposals to that effect.

► **KEYWORDS**

Autism; Developmental Disabilities; Down Syndrome;
Formation of Seminarians; Intellectual Disabilities.

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1. Introduction and Purpose

Can those with a developmental disability become *Masterpieces* in the Church? Do individuals with developmental disabilities have a role in the Church? Can they contribute in a meaningful fashion to the Church and its children and if so, how can this be done? Can a priest be of help? Is a priest typically prepared to provide *meaningful help*? Priests typically enter seminary formation with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and eventually earn a master's degree in Theology, but do either of these degrees prepare them when interacting with a parishioner who has a developmental disability?

Developmental disabilities are frequently defined as a chronic physical, cognitive, speech or language, psychological, or self-care conditions that typically originate during childhood before the age of 22 years and are likely to continue indefinitely. Such conditions require additional coordinated services, support, or other assistance for some to live an extended life.¹ The incidence of these disabilities makes it probable that priests will encounter them in their ministry. For example, one estimate suggests that 1 in every 127 people globally are on the autism spectrum.² Autism (ASD) is one of a number of disabling conditions occurring during the developmental period of human growth. The clinical presentation of autism is quite varied. On the one hand, a person with autism might have a severe intellectual disability and be unable to speak. On the other, the individual might be extremely intelligent but have behaviors and a social awkwardness that is crippling. Between these two extremes are thousands of individuals with varying physical, psychological and spiritual capacities and needs.

In a meta-analysis examining the prevalence of intellectual disability, another disability impacting cognitive functioning, the incidence found across 52 studies was reported to be 10.37/1000 persons, or approximately 1% of the world's population.³

The prevalence of Down Syndrome worldwide is estimated to be about 21.51 per 100,000 population.⁴ Down Syndrome results from a trisomy of the 21st chromosome and leads to diagnostic profile including intellectual disability, speech and hearing disabilities, cardiac anomalies and a variety of other symptoms. Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Intellectual Disability

¹ Cf. S.L. BOULET – C.A. BOYLE – L.A. SCHIEVE, *Health care use and health and functional impact of developmental disabilities among US children, 1997-2005*, in «Archives of Pediatrics & adolescent medicine» 163 (2009) 1, 19-26, <<https://doi.org/10.1001/archpediatrics.2008.506>>.

² Cf. «The Lancet Psychiatry» (2024).

³ Cf. P. MAULIK et al., *Prevalence of intellectual disability: A meta-analysis of population-based studies*, in «Research in Developmental Disabilities» 32 (2011) 2, 419-436, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2010.12.018>>.

⁴ Cf. J. ELFLEIN, *Prevalence rate of Down syndrome worldwide in 1990 and 2019, by gender*, in «Statista», (15.10.2024), <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1498090/global-down-syndrome-prevalence-rate-by-gender/>>, (last consulted 12.01.2025).

represent three of the more prominently known developmental disorders, but there are many others affecting over 52.9% of the population globally.⁵

In fact, UNICEF estimated that 28.9 million (4.3%) children aged 0-4 years, 207.4 million (12.5%) children aged 5-17 years, and 236.4 million (10.1%) children aged 0-17 years have moderate-to-severe disabilities based on household surveys of child functional status conducted worldwide.⁶

These numbers are staggering and raise the question of how it is possible for a priest (or any non-clinician) to recognize and know how to respond to the individual needs of so many. But, if everyone is considered a Child of God⁷ how is one to grow to their God given potential, at least from if their chief pastoral shepherd doesn't recognize them? How then, does one with a developmental disability become a *Masterpiece*?

The gospels record that Jesus extended his ministry to those having disabilities. Matthew records:

Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, went up on the mountain, and sat down there. Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others. They placed them at his feet, and he cured them. The crowds were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the deformed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind able to see, and they glorified the God of Israel.⁸

Insofar as Jesus demonstrated concern for those afflicted with disabilities, it is important that priests show similar concern to people in need. The challenge in part is that priests have not been specifically trained to recognize the needs (or the gifts) by those with disabilities and then may be limited in their ability to make Christ present to all.

2. The gift of the priestly formation and call to Holiness

According to the current *Program of Priestly Formation in the USA*,

all Christians are prompted by the Holy Spirit to share the love of Jesus Christ with others; they are called to missionary discipleship. Baptism and confirmation equip them to evangelize in all that they say and do. The goal of priestly formation is to form missionary disciples so that they are ready for consecration as shepherds for God's people, sharing in the authority of Christ the Redeemer who sent the apostles to preach and heal.⁹

Priests are not currently equipped to full “share” in the preaching and healing authority of Christ if they are unsure how to best reach and minister to

⁵ B. OLUSANYA et al., *Global and regional prevalence of disabilities among children and adolescents: Analysis of findings from the global health databases*, in «Frontiers in Public Health» 10 (2022), 977453, 1-19, <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.977453>>.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁷ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, LEV, Vatican City 1997, nn. 1265-1271.

⁸ Mt 15,29-37.

⁹ UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Program of Priestly Formation (PPF)*, USCCB, Washington D.C. 2022, <<https://usccb.cld.bz/Program-of-Priestly-Formation-6th-edition>>, 6 (last consulted 14.02.2025).

those in their congregations who are marginalized because of their developmental disabilities. Further, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) calls priesthood candidates to just this sort of training when they wrote,

The United States is a nation with the rich cultural heritage of freedom, equality, justice for the oppressed, and open dialogue. However, an “economy of exclusion and inequality” leaves many families trapped in a “cycle of poverty” especially those with disabilities or disabling conditions.¹⁰

This calls to mind the image of Christ as the suffering servant,¹¹ and draws into empathy and service to those with developmental disabilities, who embody the suffering servant in a particular way.

According to the Program of Priestly Formation (2022), formation of men entering the priesthood is to include a well-rounded guided experience in four areas of formation including: human; spiritual; intellectual; and pastoral areas to best prepare future shepherds of our church. As might be expected, it is important for men entering formation to learn how to pray while learning Scripture, so it's not surprising that great deal of emphasis is placed on these areas of formation. Further, a large amount of time and study is spent helping the seminarian to examine his own personality, for as the priest he is to become a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meetings with Jesus Christ:

As the humanity of the Word made flesh was the *instrumentum salutis*, so the humanity of the priest is instrumental in mediating the redemptive gifts of Christ to people today. The disciple of Jesus Christ is a person who is free to be who he is in God's design: someone who does not - in contrast to popular culture - conceive or pursue freedom as the expansion of options or as individual autonomy detached from others, but who rather overcomes every form of self-promotion or emotional dependency.¹²

3. The Role of the Seminary

If the future priest is to be “instrumental in mediating the redemptive gifts of Christ,” then he must have knowledge and experience in working with the varied populations which he will be called to serve. This knowledge and experience should come at that point in the candidate’s formation where it can be handled with supervision, introspection, and reflection. As such, part of his formation should provide a systematic and purposeful exposure to individuals with disabilities. Considering the pastoral dimension of formation, «seminarians must be profoundly ecclesial and missionary in nature».¹³ Seminarians are to become aware of and prepared to serve a local church in the needs that the specific parish or diocese may have. It is important that seminaries provide

a program of apostolic activity so that their apostolic zeal and pastoral settings can be evaluated to understand the relationship of their apostolic activity to their

¹⁰ PPF, 7.

¹¹ Cf. *Is* 53, Aff.

¹² PPF, 77.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 146.

personal, spiritual, and academic formation as well as their ongoing discernment of priestly vocation.¹⁴

«Seminarians need exposure to the many cultures and languages that belong to the Catholic Church in the United States they should know how to welcome migrants and refugees pastorally, liturgically and culturally».¹⁵ This includes but is not limited to those who have disabling conditions. Those who have a different language or different way of using or understanding language need to be welcomed into the universal church in such a fashion that they both understand and genuinely feel welcomed by the priest.

It is critical that during pastoral formation the seminarian grows in prayer within the pastoral activity and in learning to establish a rhythm of life that balances prayer, service, study, exercise, and leisure. Sometimes it is important for parishioners to observe ordained ministers as holy people in whatever activity they are observed, seeing a priest pray before a meal, kneel in Church as they pray the Liturgy of the Hours, or bless both teams in a sporting event before the event begins. Formation programs are designed with this in mind, and inculcate these values in the men being formed, but a natural question arising from the review the program of priestly formation in the United States of America, is how or when in formation does the seminarian learn about, learn how to engage, learn how to recognize those members of the church who may have disabling conditions? Seminary formation appears to have a primary focus in the spiritual and intellectual dimensions. With a human formator and spiritual director, the aspects of human formation (understanding oneself in addressing personal needs and his preparation to become priest) is also a primary focus.

Often specific issues or concerns in the pastoral dimension, the needs of individuals who have disabling conditions only appeared to be a focus when chanced upon in specific pastoral situations. That is to say, recognizing those who have difficulty walking require ramps or other access into church facilities as well as for example specialized restrooms is not systematically addressed in the seminarians' classroom or practicum experiences. Further, those with hearing impairments are often offered listening devices allowing them to have liturgical functions amplified. While it may benefit those who are hard of hearing, this accommodation is not the same as providing deaf language interpretation, which is highly specialized and only rarely available.

Of greater prevalence and concern is the dearth of instruction in seminaries about the silent or invisible disabling conditions such as those with intellectual limitations, or for those with an autism spectrum disorder. If a substantial portion of the population does in fact have these limiting conditions, then a priest must be taught in the seminary how to recognize the needs of these individuals, how to respond to them or to understand what it is that they may be asking, or even the basics of how to interact with them. So much focus in seminaries is centered on human, intellectual, and spiritual formation that when one examines the

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 159.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 149.

makeup of our churches today, which now include many individuals with disabling conditions, we find that ministering to these populations is not fully being addressed during seminary formation. Although seminaries which have pastoral counseling classes can begin to briefly introduce methods of recognition and interaction with some with disabling conditions, formation time constraints relegate much of this instruction to superficial coverage that does not leave the seminarian prepared for ministry to these special members of Christ's body.

4. Summary and Creating of Masterpieces

First, it is critical for men aspiring to the priesthood to learn about disabilities and disabling conditions that are part of humanity. Second, it is equally necessary to learn methods to help the individual with disabling conditions to learn about and learn to be present with God; teaching seminarians how to offer spiritual support to someone who processes information in atypical ways is absolutely necessary. Third, it is essential that the seminarian develop and learn skill sets to both recognize and interact with those who have disabling conditions.

5. The Role of the Priest

Church architecture needs to be welcoming of those with disabilities. This goes well beyond attending to the construction requirements mandated in ADA. The term "accessible" implies access to, not active participation in, what goes on in public facilities. The term's definition must be expanded to mean more than being able to enter a church were to hear the proceedings passively, but should be deepened to include having the ability to observe and to participate actively in our liturgical traditions in meaningful ways, serving as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, and ushers as well as acolytes and to understand how their roles completes and enriches liturgical functions, not just for themselves but for the entire congregation. Inclusivity, then, is more than just accessibility to the church structure itself or to the restrooms. Rather, inclusivity means meaningful involvement and is an active process and a right inherent in baptism.

Consequently, the priest must be in a position to teach parish staff and parishioners about disabilities and how to work with congregants who have disabilities. Because they receive little to no training or exposure to individuals with disabilities, new priests are hardly in a position to lead their communities toward a more inclusive stance. Priests need to provide spiritual support to all of its members and should work towards increasing awareness of the needs of those with disabilities.

Academically, there should be a minimum of a class that explores disabilities throughout the life cycle. This could be incorporated in a course that addresses spirituality throughout the life cycle, providing information about typical and atypical psychological, moral and spiritual development as topics. If taught in a comparative fashion, then the seminarians would be learning how to deal with children, teens, adults and the elderly who are neurotypical as well as how to work with their neuroatypical peers.

There needs to be a practicum or internship experience where the seminarians can be actively engaged in ministry to individuals with disabilities. The experience should be constructed in such a way that it engages the seminarian with individuals in many categories of disabilities. Research in a variety of fields including teacher education has demonstrated that people who have more contact with individuals with disabilities demonstrate fewer misconceptions about disabilities and those who have them, as well as increased sense of optimism related to individuals with disabilities.¹⁶ Additionally, numerous studies have demonstrated the relationship with training and professionals increased self-efficacy, levels of confidence and improved skills and practices in working with individuals with disabilities.¹⁷ These studies all demonstrate the importance of giving seminarians both training in the characteristics of, and experiences working with, people with disabilities in order to grow the future priests' confidence in and self-efficacy for engaging with this population in their future congregations.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church in the United States of America is changing and evolving. As the number of men in priestly formation has steadily decreased in recent decades, the composition of members of local parishes has similarly changed and is increasingly more inclusive and representative of the population with significant numbers of those with both visible and invisible disabilities. Seminaries need to respond to the changes within their diocesan parishes to include preparation and skill sets needed by priests to more meaningfully respond as a universal church to those with disabling conditions, including not only those with physical and visual disabilities as well as those whose disabling condition is not necessarily clear or apparent.

I often challenge my seminarians to explain how, if they cannot recognize those with disabling conditions in the congregation, they are responding to those with disabilities and their families. I ask them to ponder the possible result that if their congregants with disabilities do not feel included, or feel that their needs are not being met, it may be likely that these individuals will not continue to be a member of their parishes. I have yet to receive an answer that indicates that the

¹⁶ Cf. J.J. BARR – K. BRACCHITTA, *Effects of contact with individuals with disabilities: Positive attitudes and majoring in Education*, in «The Journal of Psychology» 142 (2008) 3, 225-244, <<https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.142.3.225-244>>.

¹⁷ Cf. M. BROCK et al., *Statewide assessment of professional development needs related to educating students with autism spectrum disorder*, in «Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities» 29 (2014) 2, 1-13, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357614522290>>; W. CHUNG et al., *An examination of in-service teacher attitudes toward students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Implications for professional practice*, in «Current Issues in Education» 18 (2015) 2, 1-10, <<https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1386>> (last consulted 10.02.2025); J.M. PAYNTER – D. KEEN, *Knowledge and use of intervention practices by community-based early intervention service providers*, in «Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders» 45 (2015) 7, 1614-1623, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2316-2>>; A. JOHNSON – L. SOARES – A. GUTIERREZ DE BLUME, *Professional development for working with students with autism spectrum disorders and teacher self-efficacy*, in «George Educational Researcher» 18 (2021) 1, 1-25.

men feel they should get training, but if a priest is to help any or all of its members of the parish to become *Masterpieces*, that additional preparation appears to be necessary.

Alla ricerca dei capolavori: il ruolo del Sacerdote nell'aiutare le persone con disabilità dello sviluppo a raggiungere i potenziali definiti da Dio

► **SOMMARIO**

L'articolo esamina il ruolo del sacerdote nel potenziamento delle persone con disabilità dello sviluppo, con la ferma convinzione che ognuno sia chiamato a essere un capolavoro, come Dio intende che sia. Partendo dal delineare la prevalenza di disabilità dello sviluppo come autismo, disabilità intellettiva e sindrome di Down, l'articolo prosegue traendo ispirazione dal modello evangelico della pastorale inclusiva di Gesù, da cui stabilisce la necessità del protagonismo in questo riguardo da parte del clero, a cui spetta la responsabilità di realizzare e costruire una comunità ecclesiale di partecipazione e ministero condiviso. Tentando una critica proattiva dell'attuale programma e modello di formazione nei seminari, l'articolo registra le esigenze emergenti in questo senso, su cui occorre riflettere seriamente, e lancia anche alcune proposte concrete in tal senso.

► **PAROLE CHIAVE**

Autismo; Disabilità dello sviluppo; Disabilità intellettuali;
Formazione dei Seminaristi; Sindrome di Down.

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