**Life in Christ: The person made in the image of God.**

In the Book of Revelation a vision is given to St John of a huge number, impossible to count, of all kinds of people, a great diversity, shouting praise and giving glory to God.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are the martyrs and saints washed clean. A few chapters later St John is told that God has made his home in this new heaven and new earth among human beings: they will be his people and he will be their God, and water is given freely to anyone who is thirsty.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is a vision of full reconciliation of diversity in unity at the end times, the Communion of Saints in the presence of God. It expresses the greatness of God’s gifts to human beings, gifts of creation, redemption and sanctification. ‘Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb’.[[3]](#footnote-3) And the Church’s joyful tradition of canonisation demonstrates that this great diversity of saints giving glory to God includes saints with disabilities.

On earth Jesus begins his public ministry with the proclamation ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Church continues the mission of Christ and confesses the *one* faith received from the *one* Lord, transmitted by *one* Baptism, even though the Church family is made up of so many different people, languages and cultures.[[5]](#footnote-5) Unity in diversity: the one Body of Christ made up of many different parts, where everyone has a part to play in the whole,[[6]](#footnote-6) where as St Paul says, no one part can say to another part ‘I have no need of you’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Pope Francis speaks of the Church as a ‘great orchestra in which there is great variety’, where the Holy Spirit blends the variety into harmony. Each person is different. Each person brings their own special God-given gift to enrich the others.[[8]](#footnote-8) We are each called by name and are asked to respond in faith. Yet God wills to make people holy and save them not just individually but as a people, the People of God.[[9]](#footnote-9) We are all in this together.

The person with disabilities is one with all the very many people entrusted to the Church’s care. Just like all God’s children the person with disabilities is in this world to know God, to love him, to serve him and so to come to paradise.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the Catechism the section on *Life in Christ and the person made in the image of God* expresses precisely this gift of the dignity of the human person and this goal, our vocation to beatitude. As early church fathers such as Justin, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, explain, we are made in the image of God and we are all called to grow into his likeness through a life in Christ.[[11]](#footnote-11) This vocation is both personal and concerns the human community as a whole.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**The gift of the image**

Through God’s great gift of creation every human being without exception is created an image of God: beauty in diversity. This means that as a matter of identity human beings are not simply biological: we are theological beings. This image of God in human beings is of the Three in One: it is both relational and distinct. This Three-in-One is not a difference that divides, it is diversity in unity. The relational aspect of the image of God in human beings is captured in the insights that we all have the same origin and Father, and we all carry in ourselves the image and likeness of the same God in Trinitarian unity.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The distinct yet unifying aspect of the image of God in each human being is profoundly expressed by the truth that ‘in reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear’.[[14]](#footnote-14) As Tertullian says, ‘in whatever way the clay was pressed out, he [God] was thinking of Christ’.[[15]](#footnote-15) As Pope John Paul II explains specifically in reference to people with intellectual disabilities, ‘when God turns his gaze on man, the first thing he sees and loves in him is not the deeds he succeeds in doing, but his own image’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Christ took on the fragility of humanity, ‘being in every way like a human being’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

God loves fragile human beings. This is what human beings who yearn to be strong, independent and autonomous do not understand: that God made us and loves us in our fragile human nature for as St Paul tells us when we are weak we are strong because God’s grace is enough for us.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The distinct and unique aspect of the image of God is expressed by the truth that each unique and unrepeatable human being in his or her very being, alone before God, is wanted by God for his or her own sake.[[19]](#footnote-19) And God does not make mistakes: differences belong to God’s plan.[[20]](#footnote-20) In his book the *City of God* St Augustine discusses the diversity that exists among human beings.[[21]](#footnote-21)Augustine mentions people born with extra fingers or toes as well as people born so deformed that they appeared to be monstrous births. Augustine is very clear that these human beings, coming from human parents, are not only truly human, but also they are not aberrations or accidents: God, he says, does not make mistakes he knows what he is doing. God loves the child born with disabilities personally and with special tenderness.[[22]](#footnote-22) In the fragile diversity of the human family there is no them and us. God leaves no one untouched and God draws each person closer to himself.

If God is bracketed out of our understanding of what it is to be human then the human being becomes just one more example of a living being, like any other organism, yet at a higher stage of perfection. In this mentality what counts is what capacities and abilities the individual has, and alongside speed, function and efficiency in Western cultures autonomy is especially prized. As a consequence people with disabilities, in particular with cognitive disabilities, are awarded a lower status and may even be denied personhood. Human fragility becomes a limitation instead of a characteristic of our humanity. The implications of replacing being with the values of having are significant: human fragility is despised, human dignity is eclipsed, fear of the inevitable loss of our abilities, especially our mental abilities becomes overwhelming, hope is crushed. When the Church, in her service to the whole human family, champions the personal dignity of every human being regardless of condition or situation she restores human hope; when the Church proclaims the love of God for every person she offers hope that is real and certain and lasting, theological hope that can never disappoint. Part of evangelisation is to tell people that God loves them in their very being. As Pope Francis reminds us, there is great joy in the knowledge that ‘when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The wonder of being created in God’s image grounds human dignity. But what is truly astonishing, surprising, wonderful is that through his incarnation, life, suffering, death and resurrection Jesus has raised humanity to a dignity beyond this dignity, a dignity beyond compare – we are called to participate in the very life of God.[[24]](#footnote-24) Christ ‘the light of humanity’ calls all human beings in their great diversity to salvation and this light ‘shines out visibly from the Church’.[[25]](#footnote-25) By the sacraments of rebirth we become ‘children of God’,[[26]](#footnote-26) and whereas creation is very good, as Christians in the new creation we are called to perfection. However, this is not human physical or mental perfection. It is perfection as excellence. Some studies in disability are very much concerned with the notion of perfections and imperfections or deficiencies in the bodies or minds of people with disabilities. This emphasis on physical or mental perfection or lack of perfection limits itself to an understanding of what appears to be the norm and what appears to deviate from the norm. As such it detracts from the beauty of diversity and goodness of being. In contrast human beings in the new creation are called to grow in likeness to God, to ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’[[27]](#footnote-27) and this is a particular kind of excellence: it is a call to holiness, to live and love differently. It is a call to a life in Christ.

**The goal of likeness**

Holiness is not an option. It is not just for some but not others. In *Lumen Gentium* the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council list many great means of salvation. Significant among them are the Sacraments of the Church. The Fathers explain that strengthened by these means of salvation ‘all the faithful, whatever their condition or state – though each in his own way – are called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Each person, whatever our situation or condition, makes a contribution in whatever way we can to our growth in holiness. But to do this we – and ‘we’ includes people with cognitive disabilities – we need catechesis and ongoing formation: catechesis of the Holy Spirit, of grace, of sin and forgiveness, of formation of conscience, of virtue, of charity, of prayer: a participation in the pastoral life of the Church.

Yet a life in Christ and growth in holiness is not simply a private affair. Through the Holy Spirit the followers of Christ are moved to love God and to love one another as Christ loves them.[[29]](#footnote-29) When we encounter God in ourselves and in others, when we see others as also images of God, this makes us ‘able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship’. This is not ‘doing for’ the other person or seeing the other as an object of charity. This spirituality of communion helps us ‘to know how to “make room” for our brothers and sisters, bearing each other's burdens’ and seeing the positive in others not only as gifts for that person but also as ‘gifts for me’.[[30]](#footnote-30) This is why perhaps Pope Francis reminds us, to remove our sandals when standing on the ‘holy ground’ of our encounter with another person[[31]](#footnote-31) who is equally an image of God and another Christ to us.

In our life in Christ each one of us has a part to play in God’s plan, a vocation, and we are called to play that part well, to be and to do as God wants us to be and to do. So, according to Pope John Paul ‘for disabled people as for any human being, it is not important that they do what others do but that they do what is truly good for them, increasingly making the most of their talents and responding faithfully to their own human and supernatural vocation’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Moreover, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remind us, ‘each disciple of Christ has the obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his ability’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In this respect for Pope John Paul people with disabilities are important workers in God’s vineyard.[[34]](#footnote-34) Certainly on a human level they can offer profound witness to intrinsic human dignity, a dignity that can never be lost even when personal situations appear to the world to be undignified. They can offer profound witness to love, not only of the love that they inspire in others but also of the love, trust and unquestioning acceptance that they can give. However, in living fully and joyfully they can witness to the beauty, goodness and fragility of being and witness to being loved by God. Furthermore, in a catechesis of the Beatitudes the situation of people with disabilities provides an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the human family. In particular disability can help to shine a clear light on the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, teaching that forms a profound unity flowing from faith, hope and love.[[35]](#footnote-35) This teaching provides principles that find their inspiration in the Gospel and the attitudes characteristic of a life in Christ, principles that nurture our lives in relationship and direct us to our final happiness.

In a world affected by utilitarianism where vulnerable individuals can be sacrificed for the greater good, the principle of the common good reminds us that we all live with and for others: if one member suffers, the whole suffers. Each one of us, whatever our abilities, is called to promote the flourishing of the other as a person. We are to seek the good of the other person as if it were our own good.[[36]](#footnote-36) The common good presupposes respect for every human being, justice, and the opportunity for full and authentic development of the person as a person including spiritual development.[[37]](#footnote-37) In a world where people with disabilities are often passed over, or marginalised or excluded, under the principle of subsidiarity people are given the opportunity to accomplish what they can individually and through their own initiative, yet in the knowledge that there is always support on hand. Subsidiarity ensures that no one is denied their proper and essential place in society and it points to the fact that everyone has something original to offer the community.[[38]](#footnote-38) Coupled with the principle of participation subsidiarity also ensures that the person is included, listened to and involved.[[39]](#footnote-39) In a world where people who appear to be different are treated as different solidarity challenges structures of sin, particularly of dominance and power over others, and solidarity embraces the interdependence and equality in dignity of every human being. Solidarity reminds us that ‘we are all really responsible for all’.[[40]](#footnote-40) In a world that embraces a throw-away culture the option for the poor is a reminder that those who are little in the world’s eyes are the ones who are especially loved by God. The dependence that often accompanies disability points to the significance of trust in others. The fragility of life is a reminder that our direction is towards interdependence and ultimately towards dependence on God. As for dignity, all human beings have a dignity that can never be lost or taken away and people with disabilities are significant witnesses both to this and to the fact that justice and our common humanity demands we rectify situations of indignity and unjust discrimination. As Pope John Paul reminds us, ‘the disabled are not different from other people which is why, in recognising and promoting their dignity and rights, we recognise and promote our own dignity and rights and those of each one of us.’[[41]](#footnote-41)

To conclude. In the rich diversity that is the human family all human beings are made in God’s image and called to grow in his likeness through a life in Christ. People with disabilities are fragile but this is the same with everyone, because fragility is part of our humanity. Like all human beings people with disabilities are in need of salvation, are called to holiness, are called to worship and take their place in their Church community. Each person with or without disabilities has a unique and specific vocation. Therefore the Church has the same duties to people with disabilities as she has towards all the faithful. Moreover, those who are not baptised also have the right to adequate catechesis since they too are called to salvation.[[42]](#footnote-42) The need for new evangelisation for those who do not know Jesus, for spiritual growth in ordinary pastoral ministry, for building up a meaningful relationship to the Church[[43]](#footnote-43) applies to people with disabilities as much as to anyone else. Catechesis is for the whole Christian community and every person in it: many and one.[[44]](#footnote-44) Like all people, people with disabilities do thirst spiritually. And water is given freely to those who are thirsty.

Made in the image of God and living a life in Christ, people with disabilities also contribute significantly to the building up of the Kingdom. As St Augustine observes, people with disabilities can be real and effective witnesses to God. Augustine sees this as demonstrating that God’s grace blows where God chooses and grace ‘does not pass over any kind of capacity’.[[45]](#footnote-45) After all, as St Paul points out no one can fully grasp by their own natural powers the profundity of what it means to say that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour: ‘nobody is able to say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Made in the image of God and living a life in the Spirit and Christ, we are all thus directed towards the love that never ends.

‘Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb’.

1. Revelation 7:9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Revelation 21:4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Revelation 19:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark 1:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Catechism, 172-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1Corinthians 12:12; 12:27; Romans 12:4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *1 Corinthians 12:21.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. General Audience, St Peter’s Square, 9 October, 2013, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* no. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Catechism, 1721. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Justin, *Fragments on the Resurrection* I; III; Tertullian, *On Baptism,* V; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* IV, XXXVIII; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata ,* II, XXII. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Catechism 1877. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Catechism 1877 and 1878. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 6; *Gaudium et spes*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Pope John Paul II, ‘Mentally Ill Are Also Made in God’s Image’, *L’Osservatore Romano* 11 December, 1996, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Philippians 2:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 2Corinthians 12:9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Gaudium et spes*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Catechism 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. St Augustine, *City of God* XVI,8. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Vatican Conference on the Family and Integration of the Disabled* 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Evangelii gaudium, 2013, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 2Peter 1:4; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. John 1:12; 1John 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Matthew 5:48. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lumen Gentium, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Lumen Gentium, 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte,* 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Pope Francis, *Message 50th World Communications Day* 24 January 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Pope John Paul II, *On the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the*

    *Mentally Disabled Person* (5 January 2004), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Lumen gentium* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Christifideles laici,* 53; *World Day of the Sick,* I, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 164-167. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Catechism, 1905-1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 185-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 189-190. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,* 1988, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Pope John Paul II, *On the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,* 5 January, 2004, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *General Directory for Catechesis* 1997, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Evangelii gaudium, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *General Directory for Catechesis,* 167-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. St Augustine, *On the Merits and Remissions of Sin* I,32. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *1 Corinthians 12:3.* [↑](#footnote-ref-46)