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Being Disabled and Disability Theology: Insights From and For Catholic Social Teaching

Dr Pia Matthews

Abstract

A recent report in the UK, *Being Disabled in Britain: A Journey Less Equal* highlights the many inequalities, threats to dignity and discriminatory attitudes faced by disabled people. No doubt these are replicated in other countries. Using the evidenced-based findings from this report and the report's invitation for those concerned to join the conversation on disability, this paper explores both the way in which the experiences of people with disabilities can sharpen up an understanding of Catholic social teaching and the way in which that teaching contributes to a deeper theology of disability. Moreover insights from this teaching demonstrate that people with disabilities contribute significantly and positively to society and to interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

As 'a concise but complete overview of the Church's social teaching'¹ the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is perhaps the first port of call for people interested in what the Church has to say about people with disabilities. However in the *Compendium* there are only three paragraphs that relate specifically to people with disabilities or those with 'handicaps'.² In its section on human rights the *Compendium* #148 properly points out that 'persons with disabilities are fully human subjects, with rights and duties'. They are to be

¹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2005, Presentation xxi.

² In current disability studies it has now been recognised that 'handicap' may have pejorative connotations and so the term disability is to be preferred.

helped to participate as far as possible in family and social life and they are not to be discriminated against particularly when it comes to employment and wages.³ In its section on the family in #244 and #246 the *Compendium* emphasises that the Church's social doctrine 'constantly points out the need to respect the dignity of children' and that this becomes all the more urgent when the child is 'handicapped'.⁴ Moreover, solidarity in the family takes the form of a special service when a family member has a disability.⁵ Certainly in his encyclical letter *Laborem exercens* Pope John Paul II includes a section on the rights of disabled people in connection with work.⁶ Additionally Pope John Paul II built up a considerable body of teaching and reflection on disability.⁷ Notably perhaps there is little reference to this rich resource in Catholic social teaching in general.

Those concerned with Catholic social teaching may wonder why there are so few references in the *Compendium* to people with disabilities when statistics produced by the World Health Organisation in 2011 show that some 15% of the world's population live with some form of disability, and the numbers are growing. Furthermore disability disproportionately affects vulnerable populations and people with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty. In a catalogue of concerns the WHO report on disability found widespread evidence of inadequate policies, negative attitudes at all levels of society, lack of services, problems with service delivery, inadequate funding, lack of accessibility, lack of consultation and involvement, poorer health outcomes and lack of opportunities for people with disabilities.⁸ This analysis is borne out in the UK where in 2017 the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a comprehensive evidence-based report entitled *Being*

³ *Compendium*, 148, quoting Pope John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 1981, 22.

⁴ *Compendium*, 244, quoting Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* 1981, 26.

⁵ *Compendium*, 246.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* 22.

⁷ See Pia Matthews, *Pope John Paul II and the Apparently 'Non-Acting' Person* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013).

⁸ World Health Organisation, *World Report on Disability* 2011
http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/70670/1/WHO_NMH_VIP_11.01_eng.pdf

Disabled in Britain: A Journey Less Equal. In his comments following publication of the report the Chair of the Commission David Isaac said ‘disabled people are being left behind in society, their life chances remain very poor, and public attitudes have changed very little’.⁹ Undoubtedly, as the WHO report indicates, a similar conclusion can be reached in other countries.

Research has also shown that families with children and adults with disabilities endure significant negative effects in giving care. Not only are there severe stresses in navigating access, or more often than not, lack of access to adequate health and social care, families also have to come to term with the losses of what some may term a normal life. Notably the spectre of who will take on the care of their loved one in the future frequently looms large.¹⁰ Certainly families also report significant positive aspects to parenting a child with disabilities and these enable many parents to adapt to stressful experiences.¹¹ However, it appears that public attitudes and at times little or no support plus the emotional burden of caring that is itself isolating contribute to ambivalent feelings of some parents towards their disabled children and some parents may find themselves regretting their child’s birth or even wishing for their child’s death.¹²

Although the remit of the Equality and Human Rights Commission was simply to report on the progress of equality of human rights in England, Wales and Scotland, and it clearly states that it does not offer policy solutions or an analysis of causes, it does invite ‘all those concerned’ to address the issues and take part in the conversation.¹³ For organisations

⁹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/disability-progress-%E2%80%98littered-missed-opportunities-and-failures%E2%80%99>

¹⁰ See for instance, Henry Chambers and Jill Chambers, Effects of Caregiving on the Families of Children and Adults with Disabilities, *Phys Med Rehabil Clin N Am* 26, 2015, 1-19

¹¹ Carole Beighton and Jane Wills, Are parents identifying positive aspects to parenting their child with an intellectual disability or are they just coping? A qualitative exploration. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 2017, Vol. 21 Issue 4, 325-345.

¹² See Lisa Freitag, *Extreme Caregiving: The Moral Wok of raising Children with Special Needs*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹³ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Being Disabled in Britain: A Journey Less Equal*. 2017, p.8.

such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission who urge that we ‘put the rights of disabled people at the heart of our society’¹⁴, it would seem that Catholic social teaching has much to offer that is also very much in line with a commitment to genuine equality. The contexts for Catholic social teaching are the relationships found among the whole human family, and this teaching offers certain essential principles for reflection.¹⁵ The principles of the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity and option for the poor and marginalized, subsidiarity and participation, are specifically relevant to disability even if disability is not explicitly mentioned in many of the documents associated with Catholic social teaching. Notably, these principles are implicit in the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s report *Being Disabled in Britain* though, understandably given the nature of the report, they are not developed fully.

Catholic social teaching in conversation with disability studies and theology: teaching for all

Since part of the Church’s mission is to inspire right attitudes and promote a deeper understanding of social living, then it would seem that the Church’s social teaching should have much to say about the situation of people with disabilities. And indeed this is the case albeit indirectly. Returning to the *Compendium*, after detailing the requirements of non-discrimination #148 continues, quoting Pope John Paul II, people with disabilities “‘too need to love and be loved, they need tenderness, closeness and intimacy,’”¹⁶ according to their capacities and with respect for the moral order, which *is the same for the non-handicapped and the handicapped alike*’ (my italics). The point is very significant for disability studies

¹⁴ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church’s Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, 1988, 30-42.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, Message for the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person, 5 January 2004, 5 *L’Osservatore Romano* 21 January 2004, p.6.

and for a theology of disability. People with disabilities are one with all people with or without disabilities: there is no them and us. There is no need to single out people with disabilities as if they are a separate class on their own because Catholic social teaching applies to all human beings no matter their situation or condition and the Church is rightly concerned about all people who are marginalized, isolated, or poor or in need, as many people with disabilities are.

Although this point may appear unremarkable there is a strong current in disability studies, perhaps most notably expressed in liberation theologies of disabilities, that charges Christianity and ‘the Church’ (rather than Church communities that fall short) with creating barriers for people with disabilities. These barriers range from access and architecture to interpretation of scripture, and also include actual harm through a theology that ignores or excludes people with disabilities.¹⁷ Certainly much work has now been done to craft a better understanding of scripture and in particular the gospel healing narratives have been interpreted in terms of discipleship.¹⁸ Moreover some of these issues were recognized over thirty years ago when the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops issued their *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities* in 1978, and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales issued their report *Valuing Difference* in 1998. Both documents acknowledge failures in the pastoral care of people with disabilities.¹⁹ Notably in their *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities* the US bishops accept with regret that the Church tends to respond to people’s needs only after public opinion has compelled the

¹⁷ See for instance, Deborah Creamer, Theological Accessibility: the Contribution of Disability, *Disability Studies Quarterly* Fall 2006, Vol.26, No.4; Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007).

¹⁸ See for instance, Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); Matthews, *Pope John Paul II and the Apparently ‘Non-acting’ Person* pp.99-105.

¹⁹ United States Catholic Conference, *Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (Washington: United States catholic Conference, 1978 and 1998), p.2; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *Valuing Difference: People with disabilities in the life and mission of the Church* (1998 [http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Publications/Valuing-Difference-1998/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Publications/Valuing-Difference-1998/(language)/eng-GB))

Church to do so.²⁰ Both documents call attention to the rights of people with disabilities and provide practical advice for promoting access and inclusion in the life and activities of the Church.

However the thrust of both documents is not simply to highlight discrimination or the problems faced by people with disabilities. *Valuing Difference* was built upon the bishops' 1981 statement called *All People Together*, a statement that encouraged greater recognition of the contribution that people with disabilities make to the life of the Church. Both the US *Pastoral Statement* and *Valuing Difference* call for proper consultation with people with disabilities so that they are themselves the architects of change, the documents encourage full participation, and they emphasize that everyone, people with disabilities included, have a duty to do the Lord's work according to their capacities.

Valuing Difference notes that 'change is often a slow process' particularly when it concerns a conversion in attitude and where practical changes come up against lack of resources.²¹ Nevertheless, while it is true to say that the principles and points of action in the two documents remain as valid today as thirty years ago, and it is also important to celebrate progress that has been made, it is equally valid to question the extent to which the Church has been successful in implementing change in church communities. However a glance at the strengths and weaknesses of some theologies of disability indicate how easy it is inadvertently to create barriers. This is one of the reasons why a conversation between disability theology and Catholic social teaching can be fruitful.

Certainly there has been great progress in disability studies and in theologies of disability: these have forced disablism into the public consciousness and they have demanded change; they have opened up new ways of thinking about God and humanity, perfection and

²⁰ United States Catholic Conference, *Pastoral Statement*, p.2

²¹ *Valuing Difference*, p.9

imperfection. However, the conclusions from disability studies and a theology of disability are not without some risk. To begin with it is difficult to speak of *a* theology of disability: not only are there different theologies of disability with very different theological interpretations and in some cases an additional focus on gender or sexuality, there are also many different disabilities. The needs and wants of the Deaf community are not the same as the needs and wants of those with profound and complex multiple medical and intellectual disabilities. Quite rightly, many of those working in disability studies wish to focus on the real and lived experience of disability and to this end they claim that an account of disability on which professional practices and interventions are based must be written and spoken of by people with disabilities otherwise it will inevitably be a distortion.²² However this conviction immediately marginalizes further those who do not have a voice or those with profound cognitive disabilities. Similarly a focus on the empowerment of people with disabilities to enable decision-making and autonomy recognizes the rights and dignity of disabled people²³, still it risks creating a hierarchy of disability since there are some people who are not able to make meaningful choices. Critiquing particular frameworks of disability may be helpful in identifying discrimination but adopting one particular model of disability over and against another tends to pigeon-hole people and may not be sufficiently nuanced.²⁴ A theology that stresses human vulnerability where all are vulnerable seeks to find a genuine commonality between people,²⁵ yet it also risks trivialising serious disability or patronising disabled people who do not think they are vulnerable. Disability theologies of friendship are compelling

²² Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability from Theory to Practice* (New York: Palgrave 1996), p.9

²³ See for instance Jim Mansell and Julie Beadle-Brown, *Active Support: Enabling and Empowering People with Intellectual Disabilities* (London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2012).

²⁴ Tom Shakespeare, The social model of disability: an outdated ideology? *Research in Social Science and Disability* 2002, Vol. 2 pp.9-28.

²⁵ See for instance Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008)

where they offer an authentic community of persons²⁶ but when the focus is principally on our network of human relationships they risk failing to take account of the fact that the very being of a person matters. Theologies of inclusion or belonging may be real calls for action²⁷ but they tend to suggest either that people are allowed in on the basis of another's good will and that exclusion is possible or that a place has to be found for someone and that to belong they have to be missed by someone else. Theologies such as Nancy Eiesland's powerful image of a disabled God who retains his wounds after the resurrection is certainly a thought-provoking attempt to re-imagine God by taking account of the experience of disability. However once again this risks excluding some people with disabilities or leading to a hierarchy of disabilities: it is after all more difficult to envisage a God with cognitive disability. Moreover it is theologically problematic to speak without qualification of the death of God.

Although Catholic social teaching is also not without problems or limitations, it does resist saying that there is a specific disability theology or social approach that sets people with disabilities theologically or socially apart from other human beings. This is perhaps due to the way in which the principles of the teaching form a unity such that human dignity goes hand in hand with the common good, and solidarity exists alongside all the other principles notably subsidiarity and participation. Furthermore this means that no one aspect of being human, whether it is vulnerability, autonomy or friendship, becomes the only guiding principle. However, in failing to engage directly with disability it may appear that Catholic social teaching has nothing to say or has neglected people with disability. This is why it is important to connect disability to the principles of Catholic social teaching.

²⁶ See for instance Jason Reimer Greig, *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L'Arche, Medical Ethics and Christian Friendship* (USA: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

²⁷ See for instance John Swinton, From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 2012 Vo, 16/2, pp.172-190

Moreover, significantly and in contrast to those who cast people with disabilities as the victims of oppression, discrimination and barriers, or objects of charitable action, Catholic social teaching offers a positive message to people with disabilities: it gives the opportunity for people with disabilities to be what Pope John Paul calls ‘the main actors’.²⁸ Rather than focus on what others do for them, Pope John Paul looks at how people with disabilities contribute to their societies and what they do for the world. Specifically for Pope John Paul people with disabilities are the main actors because they express in themselves a true image of Christ to be discerned by all those who come to their assistance; they can witness to the significance of life as a gift from God in all its varied circumstances; and they can help to build up a ‘civilisation of love’.²⁹ In the context of Catholic social teaching, people with disabilities can heighten awareness of the principles of Catholic social teaching and help us all (whether disabled or not) to sharpen our thinking about our lives in community.

However this is not to think of people with disabilities as instruments who make the rest of us better people,³⁰ though it may be fruitful to think of the principles of Catholic social teaching as inevitably enabling all people in their relationships to make each other better people. Nor is it to think that only people with disabilities can take on this task. Indeed we must avoid this mistaken notion of ‘them and us’. Rather it is, as St Paul tells the Corinthians, that ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong’ (1Cor 1:27). From Moses the stammerer, (Exodus 6:13, 30) to the man born blind (John 9), God works through people in their weakness and vulnerability, to challenge those who think they are strong, independent and invincible. People who mistakenly think they are strong and independent perhaps find it more difficult than other

²⁸ Pope John Paul II, *World Day of the Sick*, 1993, I, 5.

²⁹ Pia Matthews, *Pope John Paul II and the Apparently ‘Non-Acting’ Person* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013), 133-135.

³⁰ See Thomas Reynolds’ critique in *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* pp.38-40.

people to answer the call to conversion and to community in solidarity because they feel no need. They are reliant on their own abilities. In contrast the lived experience of people with disabilities both allow the principles of Catholic social teaching to be put most fully into practice and demonstrate that the principles in reality apply to all for the authentic flourishing of all.³¹

Lived experience

When people think of positive examples of the lived experience of people with disabilities first to come to mind may be the communities of L'Arche. Certainly in healthcare services L'Arche communities are considered to offer high quality person-centred residential support for people with learning disabilities. However L'Arche is not simply a service provider for vulnerable populations. The theory behind L'Arche is that assistants choose to share their lives with people with learning disabilities by living in the same house or at least close to them.³² To be sure L'Arche communities are committed to proper safeguarding and quality care standards. However this idea of an inclusive community of shared lives goes beyond the relationship of professional carer and client or employed personal assistant, to relationships of friendship and community support. With the UK NHS target to provide person-centred care in the community and in partnership with voluntary organisations,³³ and the way in which the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report *Being Disabled in Britain* highlights problems for disabled people of isolation and barriers to making and sustaining friendships,³⁴ L'Arche seems to provide an admirable way forward.

³¹ Pia Matthews, *Pope John Paul II and the Apparently 'Non-Acting' Person* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013), Chapter 6.

³² <http://www.larche.org.uk/what-we-do>

³³ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/vanguards-support-directory.pdf>

³⁴ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.76.

Still, it is a misconception to view L'Arche communities as primarily excellent exemplars of community support or a solution to a social problem or even as a superior form of friendship. The founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier explains that L'Arche communities have theological significance because God is present and God has chosen and called each one of its members.³⁵ Moreover, Vanier understands that through L'Arche communities 'God reminds us of the essential purpose of human life: out of love, we have been created to love'.³⁶ Living in communities that foster such transformative love enables people to grow in the process of truly becoming human.³⁷

L'Arche communities represent the 'lived fraternity' of an authentic community of friendship that can grow and flourish in small local communities. Such a 'lived fraternity' is promoted by the Council of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) in their influential document produced from the proceedings of their Fifth General Conference in 2007. Known as the *Aparecida* document, this is influential not least because its chief editor was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Bergoglio now Pope Francis. Many see in *Aparecida* the blueprint for the Pope's message of mission and evangelisation, and option for the poor and marginalized. Notably, *Aparecida* stands squarely in the tradition of Catholic social teaching. As the Latin American bishops explain 'lived fraternity' is helped by recognising ourselves as 'a family', brothers and sisters, a unity enriched by diversity.³⁸ The bishops point out, 'aspirations for life, peace, fraternity and happiness do not find a response in the midst of the idols of profit and efficacy, insensitivity to the suffering of others, attacks on life' where there is a constant struggle to defend the life, dignity and integrity of the human person.³⁹

³⁵ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p.44

³⁶ Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche: A spirituality for every day* (London: SPCK, 2013).

³⁷ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).

³⁸ CELAM, *Vth General Conference to the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, Concluding Document*, May 2007, 307-308, 525.

³⁹ CELAM, 468.

Lived experience and life in the family

According to Pope Benedict XVI the Church forcefully maintains the link between life ethics and social ethics because the Church does not regard issues to do with life as questions purely of individual or private morality. Quoting Pope John Paul, Benedict draws attention to the way in which society ‘lacks solid foundations’ when it both asserts fundamental values such as human dignity yet at the same time acts contrary to this by allowing some human lives to be violated or devalued.⁴⁰ Certainly in the social arena the Equality and Human Rights Commission share this concern. In what the Equality and Human Rights Commission call ‘a badge of shame’, successive UK governments and public attitudes mean that people with disabilities are ‘still being treated as second class citizens’.⁴¹ The Commission highlights the way in which the dignity of disabled people has been violated by harassment and violence, by social inequalities and by isolation, by inadequacies and poor accessibility in healthcare.⁴² However what the Commission does not consider is the way in which discrimination is entrenched in the way in which society sees the very lives of people with disabilities. As Andrew Lee, the Director of People First (Self Advocacy) reported in his evidence to the House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights *A Life Like Any Other?*, a committee project that predates *Being Disabled in Britain* by some ten years, ‘at the root of the barriers we face is an idea that we are less good and less worthwhile than other people. Doctors try to stop us from being born in the first place when we are born our parents are given negative views about our chances in life’.⁴³ Tellingly, in the document *A Life Like Any Other* published in 2007 as a result of the House of Lords Committee findings Lee’s

⁴⁰ Pope Benedict, *Caritas in veritate*, 2009: 15.

⁴¹ *Being Disabled in Britain*, Foreword, pp.6-7.

⁴² *Being Disabled in Britain*, pp.23, 82, 97.

⁴³ Oral evidence of Andrew Lee, Ev 1, 25 June 2007, House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights Seventh Report of Session 2007-08 *A Life Like Any Other? Human Rights of Adults With Learning Disabilities* www.bild.org.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?aId=3724

comment about the medical profession is not included though his comment about the negative views given to parents is.⁴⁴

In the link between life and social ethics Catholic social teaching draws specific attention to the role played by families. This teaching has long recognized the centrality of the family as the ‘primary vital cell of society’⁴⁵ and marriage as ‘the first form of communion between persons’.⁴⁶ Families are thus not simply private communities: families have an important social role.⁴⁷ Part of this role is to challenge some current misconceptions. With the many advances in pre-natal testing a common view is that after a diagnosis of risk of disability parents who do choose to continue a pregnancy are seen either as heroic and self-sacrificing to take on this unfortunate burden or selfish and lacking in compassion for having exposed their child to a life that is scarcely worth living. There is the misconception that preventing birth is the true kindness. Instead Catholic social teaching reminds society that every child no matter what their condition or situation is ‘a unique and unrepeatable gift from God’.⁴⁸ The Church holds that families who accept their children as wonderful gifts demonstrate truly human hospitality. Yet the Church also appreciates the realities and difficulties that families may face in a world hostile to disability.⁴⁹ In a world that is still under the power of sin ordinary families who welcome and love sons and daughters who are disabled, as well as elderly disabled family members are powerful witnesses to the dignity of all human beings. These families are not inward looking self-sufficient or private communities. Rather they can be examples of the joy that is being and living together.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Andrew Lee, House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights Seventh Report of Session 2007-08 *A Life Like Any Other? Human Rights of Adults With Learning Disabilities* #121 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200708/jtselect/jtrights/40/40i.pdf>

⁴⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 1965, 11.

⁴⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 1965, 12

⁴⁷ *Familiaris consortio*, 1981, 42-48.

⁴⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Homily*, 7 October, 1979; *Letter to Families*, 1994, 6; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 196, 197.

⁴⁹ *Evangelium vitae*, 1995, 26, 63.

⁵⁰ See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* 2016, 195.

Of course in order to witness to this real human dignity families need to be supported. Unfortunately this support may not be forthcoming even from within Church communities themselves as Pope Francis recognises with his renewed call for the formation of ‘communities of families’.⁵¹ Nevertheless the principles of Catholic social teaching remind us all that as a matter of human justice there is work to be done to remedy unjust situations and central to this is the recognition of human dignity in all human beings no matter their condition or situation.

Human dignity

The principle of human dignity is foundational for all the principles of Catholic social teaching and it is perhaps misunderstandings of dignity that are most challenging for people with disabilities. The Equality and Human Rights Commission begins by stating that it has produced its report out of its duty to promote and enforce ‘the laws that protect our rights to fairness, dignity and respect’.⁵² The report notes the legislative framework that protects people with disabilities (though it does not allude to a right to life) and it draws attention to the international *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* that among other things, promotes respect for the ‘inherent dignity’ of people with disabilities.⁵³ The report next mentions dignity in connection with harassment that is described as violating a person’s dignity, and then where poverty or material deprivation may compromise dignity. ‘Unmet needs’ relating to quality of life in terms of ability to work and social isolation also affect dignity.⁵⁴ The ‘right to dignity’ is particularly infringed by inadequacies in psychiatric healthcare where ‘controlling practices’ such as limited access to outside areas and ‘rigid

⁵¹ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 197.

⁵² *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.2.

⁵³ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.20.

⁵⁴ *Being Disabled in Britain*, pp.23, 70, 82.

visiting times' seem to serve the needs of the hospital rather than the patient.⁵⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report does not do more than give illustrations where dignity may be threatened, after all, as the report demonstrates people instinctively seem to know that dignity has been compromised even when those situations persist. Nevertheless a more considered approach to dignity may be in order.

It seems fruitful to look at dignity in healthcare settings since dignity has been a major part of the conversation for some years ever since Ruth Macklin, in a rather brief article in the *British Medical Journal*, declared dignity to be a 'useless concept'.⁵⁶ Discussion around dignity in healthcare is especially relevant since dignity is often central to patient-centred care and the stakes are high, literally life or death: as the *Being Disabled in Britain* report points out, in addition to physical and chemical restraints used for behaviour management, Do Not Attempt Resuscitation (DNAR) notices are routinely being placed on the files of disabled patients without their knowledge or consent.⁵⁷ For those who operate out of a framework that places a premium on autonomy, dignity is often equated with the ability for self-determination, the ability to make choices.⁵⁸ In some bioethical frameworks, for instance the four principle approach advocated by Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, autonomy is the ruling principle of the four. If a human being does not show the capacity for autonomy then care for that human being falls under the other principles of beneficence, non-maleficence (do no harm) and justice (interpreted narrowly as giving someone their due). It would seem that people who value autonomy often see the life of a person without autonomy – the life of a disabled person – as not worth living, that human being is better off dead, and death is not a harm. Take away autonomy and the remaining three principles may not add up

⁵⁵ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.97. Detention for mental health reasons was also noted as adversely affecting dignity, p.122.

⁵⁶ Ruth Macklin, 'Dignity is a useless concept', *BMJ* 2003, 327:1419.

⁵⁷ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.11.

⁵⁸ Ruth Macklin, 'Dignity is a useless concept', *BMJ* 2003, 327:1419.

to protection at all, as the prevalence of DNAR notices for disabled patients demonstrates. It is perhaps no wonder then that some disability advocates focus principally on empowering choice.

However a deeper appreciation of the principle of human dignity challenges any attempt to reduce dignity to a characteristic like autonomy where dignity, like autonomy, can be lost. According to Catholic social teaching every human being has the dignity of being a human being from their very beginning to their natural end.⁵⁹ This is why screening out disabilities such as Down Syndrome by prenatal testing is not eliminating disability, rather it is cutting short the personal life of a human being. Reflected in the notion of inherent dignity, this is an intrinsic dignity that can never be lost. Certainly inherent dignity can be understood without appeal to theology as international documents such as the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* prove. Nevertheless from a theological perspective all human beings have dignity both in the natural dimension of their existence and in the supernatural dimension since all human beings from the very beginning of their existence are called to share in the life of the Trinity.⁶⁰ To be sure, as *Being Disabled in Britain* points out people can be in undignified situations and both as a matter of justice and as a matter of recognising human beings as personal beings, this should be remedied. However, the insistence on intrinsic dignity and on supernatural dignity guarantees the equality in dignity of all human beings no matter their situation or condition. This is an important point since discussion of violations or infringements of dignity may suggest that dignity is simply attributed to people. Catholic social teaching agrees that it is necessary to safeguard and promote dignity and it places this as a task for the whole community.⁶¹ Nevertheless, in their very existence people with disabilities ‘point up more clearly the dignity and greatness’ of human beings.⁶² As Pope

⁵⁹ *Evangelium vitae*, 2; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae*, 2008, 1.

⁶⁰ *Dignitas Personae*, 9.

⁶¹ *Compendium*, 145.

⁶² *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, 22.

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.’⁶³

The common good

The idea that the duty to promote and safeguard the dignity of each and every human being is a matter for the whole community seems to undergird the report *Being Disabled in Britain*. As the report states, ‘it is essential that as a society we recognise and address these structural problems [that lead to the denial of everyday rights] urgently and comprehensively. We are calling for a new national focus on disability rights, so that disabled people are no longer treated as “second-class citizens”’.⁶⁴ With its focus both on discriminatory attitudes and on failures of the state to secure the rights and dignity of disabled people the report places the responsibility for people’s flourishing on individuals and on society as a whole and this seems to be in keeping with an understanding of the common good.⁶⁵ The report makes frequent reference to the need for access to appropriate services and benefits that are a requirement for human well being and flourishing and this is in keeping with the kind of provision listed in Catholic social teaching.⁶⁶ However the principle of the common good is not simply an account of socio-economic well-being.⁶⁷ Understandably, it would seem that the remit of the Equality and Human Rights Commission to promote and safeguard the rights of all people including people with disabilities is an end in itself and it has value only in

⁶³ 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.

⁶⁴ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.8.

⁶⁵ *Compendium*, 168.

⁶⁶ The list in Catholic social teaching is broader because it includes basic human rights to, for instance food, *Compendium*, 166. See for instance *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.14.

⁶⁷ *Compendium*, 170.

reference to other people's rights. In contrast the common good has broader application and it has a transcendent dimension.

The principle of the common good is concerned with the good of all people and of the whole person. Unlike utilitarianism, the common good is not simply the sum of particular goods, nor can the individual ever be sacrificed for the whole. The common good principle reminds us that we all live with and for others and 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.⁶⁸ The report notes the isolation and alienation felt by disabled people and it recommends strategic ways in which these feelings can be lessened, though notably it does not dwell on the ways in which people with disabilities contribute to society. Catholic social teaching explains that it is only when human beings understand that each person, with or without disabilities, has the capacity to transcend themselves through a free gift of the self to others (and to God) that human beings can recognize in themselves and in others 'the value and grandeur of the human person'.⁶⁹ In the understanding that every human being has this transcendent dimension and every person can be a gift to others, people with disabilities also play a part in building up the common good. As Jean Vanier notes a society that is concerned only with individual rights becomes closed in on itself. In contrast, the common good is truly served in communities whose members are open to each other and where loneliness, an essential aspect of humanity, is recognised and healed.⁷⁰

Solidarity and the option for the poor and marginalized

In remarking that it is a 'badge of shame' that discriminatory attitudes and systemic failures regarding disabled people still exist in Britain,⁷¹ the report *Being Disabled in Britain*

⁶⁸ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 164-167.

⁶⁹ *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, 41.

⁷⁰ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* pp.6-8

⁷¹ *Being Disabled in Britain*, pp.6-7.

implicitly seems to be pointing to a lack of solidarity in society. The report goes on to say that ‘Britain must be a fair and inclusive society in which everyone has equal opportunities to thrive and succeed’ and it adds, ‘to achieve this we must put the rights of disabled people at the heart of our society’.⁷² Notably, putting a certain group at the ‘heart’ of an issue seems to have resonance with the idea of the option for the poor and marginalized.⁷³ However the option for the poor and marginalized does not simply recognize that more often than not people with disabilities do live in economic poverty, nor does it equal a call for the ‘powerful’ to do something for the ‘powerless’. To be clear, the option for the poor in no way equates to a discriminatory attitude of the kind that is paternalistic or sets up barriers to be overcome nor is it an example of the ‘strong’ doing things for the ‘weak’. Instead, it is a reminder that those who are little in the world’s eyes are the ones who are especially loved by God.⁷⁴

Solidarity is not simply an appeal to right injustices. Solidarity takes up this love of God’s ‘little ones’ and recognizes that every human being is ‘an other’, a person with equal rights and dignity.⁷⁵ Solidarity also offers a deeper understanding of justice that is not merely about treating everyone as the same. Solidarity accepts that difference can be a matter of complementarity⁷⁶ and at the same time attention to others requires that account is taken of the ‘special and different needs of every individual, taking into consideration his or her abilities and limitations’.⁷⁷ Moreover, solidarity with disabled people highlights that life is a gift from God that ‘continues to be a gift from him in every circumstance’.⁷⁸ In Catholic social teaching solidarity is considered to be a moral virtue in social, institutional

⁷² *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.7.

⁷³ *Centesimus Annus*, 57;

⁷⁴ See Pope John Paul II, *Address to the ‘Barrio Pobre of Santa Cecilia’* 30 January, 1979.

⁷⁵ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, 39.

⁷⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Angelus Jubilee of the Disabled*, 3 December, 2000, 1.

⁷⁷ 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.

⁷⁸ Pope John Paul II, *World Day of the Sick*, VII, 1999, 2-6.

relationships and in individual relationships. In social, institutional relationships 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. In individual relationships solidarity is not ‘a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress’. Solidarity is ‘a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all’.⁷⁹ Certainly reports such as *Being Disabled in Britain* can point to inequalities, admonish inadequacies and failures, and urge change. However by placing solidarity in the category of a virtue people are encouraged to foster lasting dispositions and attitudes that may also require courage to carry out necessary social action.

Subsidiarity and participation

Solidarity is both an expression of responsibility for others and a call for every human being to play a part in society as far as they are able.⁸⁰ The *Being Disabled in Britain* report does not regard disabled people as simply passive recipients of care and services even though, following its remit, its recommendations are based on what the UK and devolved governments can do for disabled people.⁸¹ However the report relies on governmental, administrative, and academic reports plus public surveys for its evidence-based findings⁸² rather than from data gathered directly from disabled people. Indeed the report recognizes that there are noticeable ‘data gaps’ in almost all areas of concern because data on disability simply has not been collected by the government or public bodies. The report sees that the very lack of evidence is an area of concern in itself.⁸³ This lack suggests a failure to listen to

⁷⁹ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

⁸⁰ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39.

⁸¹ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.14.

⁸² *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.18.

⁸³ *Being Disabled in Britain*, pp.13-14; 16, 41-42, 69, 85, 116, 134, 160.

the voices or indeed the stories of the voiceless which are at the heart of the issue of equality and rights. Nevertheless in terms of other issues that are prominent in Catholic social teaching⁸⁴, the report does present clear evidence of gaps in equality in education provision, access to employment, rates of pay, living standards, access to healthcare, access to justice and even access to vote. In particular the report notes the social isolation and loneliness of disabled people and lack of opportunities to develop friendships, all of which are exacerbated by cutbacks in day centres and provision for participation in the community.⁸⁵

The principles of subsidiarity and participation offer solid grounds for explaining why these inequalities need to be redressed and how this is not merely a question of ‘doing for’ disabled people. Subsidiarity is an expression of the network of relationships in which we all live. As a matter of justice, 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. This principle ensures that no one is denied their proper and essential place in society and this is not a question of someone else deciding that they belong or simply making space for them. Subsidiarity is a crucial principle precisely because it points to the fact that everyone has something original to offer the community and this in turn indicates that social interactions such as friendship are not done merely for the benefit of the disabled person. As a corollary, there is a corresponding need for respect and promotion of the person so that they can take their proper place in society.⁸⁶ People who are strong and independent often forget that every person has a unique contribution to make or they see that contributions linked to speed, function and efficiency are the only worthwhile contributions. In living life fully, people with disabilities challenge the rather reduced view of what counts in life and they demonstrate the diversity of gifts and contributions that people make.

⁸⁴ *Laborem Exercens*, 22.

⁸⁵ *Being Disabled in Britain*, p.76.

⁸⁶ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 185-188.

In its section on participation and identity, the *Being Disabled in Britain* report focuses on ‘how disabled people realise their rights to take control of their own lives, to make their own choices, to develop their potential and have their needs fulfilled’ and it includes discussion of voting rights, access to services and transport, and discriminatory attitudes that create barriers to participation. Certainly these are important aspects of participation. However in Catholic social teaching participation has more profundity since it not only ensures that the person is listened to and involved. As with the principle of subsidiarity, participation is a recognition of the gifts and unique contribution that the person brings⁸⁷ and it is as much concerned with being present as with doing or achieving.⁸⁸

In terms of being at the service of society, in their *Aparecida* document the Latin American bishops believe that challenges relating to minorities in their countries, including problems of unrest and poverty, could be overcome by proper integration.⁸⁹ Similarly, encouraging participation understood as integration, inclusion, belonging and acceptance, of people with disabilities does overcome the especially acute problems of loneliness and isolation. However, participation can also be seen as more than joining in, or even belonging, significant as these are. Reducing isolation through social opportunities and possibilities of friendship might encourage or enable participation, though this risks becoming an unequal activity or a doing for someone else. Participation as a recognition that, as Pope John Paul puts it, everyone is a worker in God’s vineyard means not so much that people should include the other, rather that each person has a rightful place that is theirs and each person has a unique part to play in society and in God’s plan of salvation.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 189-190.

⁸⁸ Pia Matthews, ‘Participation and the Profoundly Disabled: Being Engaged, a Theological Approach’, *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 17/4, 2013.

⁸⁹ CELAM, 520-521.

⁹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Christifidelis laici* 1988, 53. For participation also in liturgical life see Pia Matthews, ‘Participation and the Profoundly Disabled: ‘Being’ Engaged – a Theological Approach,’ *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 17/4, (2013): 426-438.

Attitudes and discrimination

Possibly the most challenging aspect of the *Being Disabled in Britain* report is its section on discrimination, abuse, attitudes and stigma. The report states that ‘negative attitudes remain quite common’: many people think that disabled people are ‘less productive’ and they get ‘in the way’; attitudes are based on ‘patronising stereotypes’; there is a lack of understanding and a refusal to make necessary adjustments. Stigma is noticeable in relation to mental health. Disability related harassment is underreported and interaction with disabled people is frequently avoided.⁹¹ The Commission understood that it was not within its remit to offer solutions. Nevertheless the symptoms that it points to seem to indicate what Pope John Paul observed in his closing homily on the 17th World Youth Day 2002: ‘the world you are inheriting is a world which desperately needs a new sense of brotherhood and human solidarity. It is a world which needs to be touched and healed by the beauty and richness of God’s love’.⁹²

A change in attitude requires conversion and this is something difficult for secular organisations to promote. Of course, like the Commission, organisations can draw attention to inequalities and barriers to human rights, and in this way attempt to persuade people to implement a fairer society on the basis of our common humanity. However Catholic social teaching understands that the motivation for equality and remedying injustices does not lie solely in appeals to humanity or reasoning on inequality or the demands of a fair society.

Catholic social teaching is directed towards the deeper goal of *communio*. This teaching recognizes that our life together in community does not begin from personal rights or duties, as important as these are in safeguarding interests and in promoting respect. We do

⁹¹ *Being Disabled in Britain*, pp.156-157.

⁹² Pope John Paul II, *Homily*, 17th World Youth Day, 28 July, 2002, 3.

not simply have a right to fellowship with others or a duty to provide it. Rather our life in fellowship begins from a profound vocation to unity in the heart of each human being. A vocation is not simply a desire or an aspiration or even a hope. A vocation is a calling with, in theological terms, a vertical dimension: a vocation is a calling from God to be the person God wants me to be, to be more fully me. This dimension can be understood philosophically (though perhaps only in terms of a horizontal aspect) in terms of seeing the other as an other because in relationship I am more fully me. This philosophical dimension can be found in the writings of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who reminds human beings of their responsibility to respond unconditionally and immediately to the face of the other⁹³; in the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the other as a second self⁹⁴; and in philosopher John Crosby's empathetic understanding of human persons.⁹⁵

Whereas philosophical insights enjoin an individual to see the other as another, theology expects more. In theology, as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* points out, God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person but also us as community, and the social relations existing between us: as St Paul tells us 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free', a life in Christ changes everything. This means that not only individuals but also Christian communities as places of communion, witness and mission, have the task – the vocation - of transforming and redeeming social relationships.⁹⁶ However *communio* is not simply community, fellowship in action or social relationships. In the *communio personarum* the 'I' is not subordinated to the 'we', rather 'we' relationships exist to facilitate and promote the 'I'. Each person becomes a gift for the other, and a person 'can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself'.⁹⁷ Since transformation of the

⁹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, [1969], Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991.

⁹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, [1945], London: Routledge, 2002, p.412.

⁹⁵ John Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996.

⁹⁶ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 52 quoted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* 2013, 178. See also *Lumen gentium*, 9

⁹⁷ *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

world through sharing the love of Christ is God's work, attempts to establish a universal fellowship where each becomes gift for the other will not be in vain.⁹⁸ However it does require conversion.

The foundation of this vocation for each one of us and for us as a community lies in the theological insight that all have the same origin and Father, and all carry in themselves the image and likeness of the same God in Trinitarian unity. Belief in the human being as image of the Triune God impels Christians to reflect, live and communicate this gift of astonishing unity enriched by diversity. Modelled on the Trinitarian communion, this unity in diversity is expressed in self-gift and love. As Aquinas explains, no legislation, no system of values or negotiation will ever succeed in persuading people to live in unity, fellowship and peace; no line of reasoning, and we may add, philosophy, will ever be able to surpass the appeal of love. The love of God and neighbour make up a network of authentic relationships where love of God can help transform and direct relationships and human structures.⁹⁹

Since love is everything, Pope John Paul calls for not merely solidarity but the promotion of a 'spirituality of communion'. For the Pope this involves the heart contemplating the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in me and shining on the faces of brothers and sisters around me. The Pope continues, when we encounter God in ourselves and in others this movement 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 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'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 54; *Gaudium et spes*, 38.

⁹⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 207; Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.23,a.8.

¹⁰⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 2001, 43

Encountering the other person is not simply a surface affair in terms of merely coming across or meeting another. For Pope Francis and Pope John Paul the word ‘encounter’ is very rich. Pope Francis describes encounter as reaching out to people ‘as Jesus did’.¹⁰¹ Pope John Paul often uses ‘personal encounter’ to describe what happens when a person meets Christ. The gospels tell us that when Jesus encounters the men and women of his day, in that encounter there is present a transforming power, yet a power that also respects the person’s freedom. Encounter is always a path to ‘conversion, communion and solidarity’.¹⁰² Conversion is *metanoia*, a change of mentality that ‘is not simply a matter of thinking differently in an intellectual sense, but of revising the reasons behind one’s actions in the light of the Gospel’ as St Paul says to the Galatians, ‘faith working through love’.¹⁰³ Conversion leads to communion because conversion enables us to see that what we do for others we do for Christ. Conversion leads to solidarity because conversion also understands that learning to see the face of Christ in others, especially in the faces of those with whom Christ himself wished to be identified such as people who are hungry, lonely, estranged, sick, disabled, is ‘not a simple invitation to charity’. Instead it reflects an aspect of the mystery of Christ who is united in a sense with every human being¹⁰⁴ and who thereby guarantees human dignity. This is why perhaps Pope Francis reminds us, to remove our sandals when standing on the ‘holy ground’ of our encounter with another person.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion: *Being Disabled* and Catholic social teaching

The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission report *Being Disabled in Britain* is a significant publication. It highlights disability inequality and lack of progress in improving

¹⁰¹ Pope Francis, *Meditation*, 13 September, 2016.

¹⁰² Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, 7, 8.

¹⁰³ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 49.

¹⁰⁵ Pope Francis, *Message 50th World Communications Day* 24 January 2016.

the human rights of disabled people in ways that are almost certainly replicated in other countries. It is an honest account of how things are. However its remit was not to provide solutions or to identify underlying causes. Those reading the report may deduce the need to fashion a fairer society but this requires some direction. Certainly attitudes towards people with disabilities are challenged by the requirement to put disabled people at the heart of the provision of services or access or work. However a more significant challenge to discriminatory attitudes is to give a positive account of how people with disabilities not only contribute to society but also how they rescue the very notions that every person relies on, notions of dignity, equality, rights, participation in society, from an application to some people rather than to all people. Exploring the principles of Catholic social teaching from the perspective of disability heightens the significance of that teaching by showing that it can make a real difference in the lived experience of disabled people beyond the secular remedies of opportunities for equality and access. Certainly Catholic social teaching offers a moral and ethical vision that can be understood philosophically, but it also presents a theological vision. Moreover, the experience of disability deepens an understanding of Catholic social teaching as it uncovers the richness of that teaching. Applying the insights of Catholic social teaching to disability demonstrates that in the diversity of the human family the principles really apply to all and this is a significant step forward in developing theology that does not set people with disabilities theologically or socially apart.

Nevertheless, the continuing inequalities faced by people with disabilities perhaps should be a spur for Catholic social teaching to engage more directly and explicitly with disability. In a lesson drawn from the US Catholic Conference of Bishops *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities* the Church should be driving the conversation and should act rather than be prompted into action. Learning from disability studies Catholic social teaching could make more of lived experience such as that found in L'Arche

communities to inform practice. Moreover, in the spirit of honesty and candour offered by the US Catholic Bishops it is no bad thing to admit where there have been failures and where there is more work to be done.