



Respect

LIFE WEEK

MADE IN GOD'S LIKENESS

"WE MUST LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS BEING MADE IN THE
IMAGE OF GOD AND AS AN OBJECT OF HIS LOVE.

-SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL



ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK
RESPECT LIFE

A PERSON FIRST

A special need is something that someone has. It is not who they are. A person with Down syndrome is just that—a person first, a person with Down syndrome second. Never a Down syndrome person.

This might seem like a difference without a distinction, but it is not. The words we use and the way we speak to and about each other matter significantly. Recognizing the inherent person-ness in everyone we meet, and especially in persons we meet with special needs, goes very far toward creating a Culture of Life.

Jesus gave us an example for living through his own life on earth. Scripture tells us that Jesus regularly spent time with people who were blind, deaf and lame, lepers, people with hemorrhages and people who had seizures.

He is asking us to follow in his footsteps and embrace (literally!) people in our families and our society who are often marginalized due to special needs, disability, or even disfigurement. We see that most visually in the person of Pope Francis. He goes out of his way to visit, hug, and speak with persons with disabilities or special needs. With a very simple gesture of human compassion, he extends to them the love they deserve as human beings made in God's image and likeness.



IN PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Awareness of special needs has increased in recent years, and there is a growing tolerance for difference in our “you be you” culture. But tolerance is not the same as love. And, at the same time that awareness of special needs has grown, our culture has also become fascinated with being perfect.

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Just 10 years ago, believe it or not, students attending prom had photos taken at their homes or by a photographer that may have been handed out to friends at school or sent to grandparents to hang on the fridge. That's it. Facebook was just beginning. There was no Instagram or SnapChat. The world did not see your prom pictures. No one compared you with celebrities or competed to see who would get the most views or shares. Prom was just that—prom. If you looked goofy that night or you couldn't afford the most perfect dress ever, the only people who knew were the people at prom with you, and chances are they would forget pretty quickly.

Today, there is ridiculous pressure put on people to look and be perfect all the time. You never know when a friend might snap a photo and share it with the world before you have a chance to fix your hair or get the lettuce out of your teeth. One side effect is that we have become, as a culture, far less accepting of people who aren't "perfect".

For people with special needs, this requirement to be "perfect" can lead to greater anxiety. We have set the bar so high that there is virtually no room for error.

It is thought that sick or disabled persons cannot be happy, since they cannot live the lifestyle held up by the culture of pleasure and entertainment. In an age when care for one's body has become an obsession and a big business, anything imperfect has to be hidden away, since it threatens the happiness and serenity of the privileged few and endangers the dominant model. Such persons should best be kept apart, in some "enclosure" – even a gilded one – or in "islands" of pietism or social welfare, so that they do not hold back the pace of a false well-being. In some cases, we are even told that it is better to eliminate them as soon as possible, because they become an unacceptable economic burden in time of crisis. Yet what an illusion it is when people today shut their eyes in the face of sickness and disability! They fail to understand the real meaning of life, which also has to do with accepting suffering and limitations. The world does not become better because only apparently "perfect" people live there – I say "perfect" rather than "false" – but when human solidarity, mutual acceptance and respect increase.

–Pope Francis, June 12, 2016

Once again, Christians have a very different vantage point on this issue. We know that God creates each person perfect! From the beginning of time, God knew who he was going to create, and he already had a distinct plan for each person. God does not make mistakes. There is no one who has ever existed who was not intended. Even more, God created people different, each with his or her own abilities and disabilities.

Our goal in this world is not to be "perfect". We already are created perfect! Our goal is to live in full knowledge that God has created us for a specific reason and to recognize the perfection and purpose in everyone else he created too!



FROM THE BEGINNING



People with genetic diseases face attacks on their lives far worse than hateful words or discriminatory behavior. Many pregnant women today are tested to determine whether their unborn children have genetic disease that would cause them to die shortly after birth or to live with considerable special needs. And, an increasing number of parents choose to abort their children rather than allow them to live for as long as they can. For babies with Down syndrome, as many as 70% are aborted before birth.

Why is this happening? Many parents have a fear of what life will be like for their child and for themselves if faced with a disability. They are concerned that their child will face ridicule and difficulty, will have health and/or intellectual problems, and may have poor quality of life. And so, out of a misplaced sense of love, they end their child's life. What a hopeless choice to make.

Many parents later find out that the prenatal diagnosis they were given was incorrect, and they have aborted a child who had no disability. But, that really doesn't matter. We know that God has a plan for each and every person. Whether a baby is physically perfect or has genetic disease, God has created him or her out of infinite love. So, Christian families should have hope! If God sends a child with special needs, it does not mean life will be easy. But, it does mean that there will be great joy and love!

There is a great deal that we can do to reverse our culture's view of persons with disabilities and special needs. The more that we can spread kindness and love, not just tolerance, to those around us, the more we create a sense of hope.

In our families, we can welcome people with special needs. In school, we can invite people with special needs to join in so they can become fully integrated in all of our activities. And, in the broader community, we can be sure to send messages of hope and peace whenever possible to change the conversation around special needs from one of people who are "less than perfect" to an understanding that God creates everyone perfect from the beginning!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is a disability or a special need?
- What example does Jesus and Pope Francis give us in our relationships with people with disabilities?
- What are some ways we can we make people with special needs feel loved?
- How does the goal of perfection affect people with special needs?
- What is the Christian response to every human life?



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