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*Religious Formation*

*for*

*Persons with Special Needs*

## **Special Religious Education**

### **Definition:**

A ministry that responds to the religious and spiritual needs of students who have a physical, or emotional disability which impairs their participation in a regular classroom, and which may necessitate their receiving instruction in a small group, or one-on-one setting, or mainstreamed into the regular class, with special assistance.

### **Rationale:**

1. Pro-life stance of the Church
2. Theological right
3. Academic responsibility
4. Psychological perspective
5. Mission of Jesus (Matthew 11: 3-5)

***Attempts of the Church to Respond to People With Disabilities, and/or  
Special Needs***

Just a little note regarding the Archdiocese of New York:

As early as the late 1950's, a religious education program existed at what was then called Letchworth Village State School. This program expanded quickly, and included all of the traditional sacramental preparation programs, altar server training, and in the late 60's also included an altar society.

Rockland County was an early site for religious education for children with special needs. In the late 60's, there were programs in St. Peter's Parish in Haverstraw, and Immaculate Conception Parish in Stony Point. Stony Point was also the site of an ecumenical post-sacrament program.

***Statement from Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on  
Persons with Disabilities, November 1978; Revised 1989***

"It is essential that all forms of liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the fire of the Church, even by passive omission, is to deny the reality of the community. Accessibility involves far more than physical alterations to parish buildings. Realistic provisions must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments of reconciliation, confirmation, and anointing of the sick."

"The parish is the door to participation for persons with disabilities, and it is the responsibility of the pastor and lay leaders to make sure that this door is always open ... The task, on occasion, may not be an easy one; involving some persons with disabilities in parish life may challenge the ingenuity and commitment of the entire congregation. Yet in order to be loyal to its calling, to be truly pastoral, the parish must make sure that it does not exclude any Catholic who wishes to take part in its activities."

## **From Sharing the Light of Faith National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States**

(It is important to note that the terminology used in 1979 is a bit outdated, and may be offensive to most of us today. In fact, at that time the term handicapped was used synonymously with disabled. That is not the case today. The term "THOSE" was used frequently, and may seem condescending to many of us.) The important message is still there, we must provide catechesis for ALL members of our community.

### **Paragraph #39: General Diversity of Catechetical Activity**

Catechesis is for all ages, all groups, e.g. ethnic groups, and that includes handicaps within all these groups. Catechesis will vary according to language, abilities, vocation, and geographical location of those to be catechized.

There are four components that **all** have in common:

1. Sharing Faith Life
2. Experiencing Liturgical Worship
3. Taking Part in Christian Service
4. Participating in Religious Instruction (These should take into account the participants experiences and circumstances)

**Paragraph #195: Persons With Handicapping Conditions**

In 1979, 12.5% of the people in the United States experienced a handicapping condition. These conditions include:

<b>1979 Terminology</b>	<b>1999 Terminology</b>
Mental Retardation; Retardates; mentally handicapped	People with mental retardation; Developmentally challenged; Developmentally disabled
Learning Disabilities	People with a learning disability
Emotional Disturbances; emotionally handicapped	Behavioral disorder; emotional disability
Physical Handicaps	Physical disability
Hard of Hearing; Deafness; Deaf and dumb	Hearing impaired; People who are deaf
Visual Impairments; Blindness	Visually impaired; People who are blind

Catechetical programs should not isolate people with disabilities excessively or unnecessarily. Specialized training is required with some groups. **It is the responsibility of the parish to provide these learning opportunities.**

**Paragraph #231: Special Catechesis**

Catechetical programs for people with special needs are to be offered on a parish, regional and/or diocesan level.

In each condition, a different approach is needed, and those involved in teaching these programs require special training that will prepare them for their role.

**Paragraph #138: Masses for Those with Handicapping Conditions**

Masses, and all other sacramental celebrations) are to be provided to meet the special needs of participants.

From **Guidelines For the Celebration of the Sacraments with  
Persons with Disabilities**

National Conference of Catholic Bishops

1995

**There are 7 Basic Principles outlined in this work:**

1. By reason of their Baptism, **all** Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God.
2. Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community.
3. Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible.
4. Since the Parish is the center of the Christian experience. The pastor should identify/have identified, all persons within the parish boundaries with special need, and provide the assistance the persons need.
5. In accordance with Canon 777,n, 4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing for the religious formation of persons with special needs
6. "Fully accessible" parishes mean more than making physical accommodations.
7. Dioceses are encouraged to establish appropriate policies for handling specific cases needing assistance.

**Guidelines for the Sacraments**

**Baptism**

"Because it is the sacrament of universal salvation, baptism is to be made available to all who freely ask for it, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving it. Baptism maybe deferred only when there is no reason for hoping that the person will be brought up in the Catholic religion. Disability, of itself: is never a reason for deferring baptism." (par. 9)

NOTE: Persons with disabilities may also serve as sponsors for sacraments of initiation.

**Confirmation**

"Parents, those who care for persons with disabilities, and shepherds of souls especially pastors- are to see to it that the faithful who have been baptized are properly instructed to receive the sacrament of confirmation and to approach it at the appropriate time." (par. 15)

"Ail baptized, unconfirmed Catholics who possess the use of reason may receive

the sacrament of confirmation if they are suitably instructed, properly disposed, and are able to renew their baptismal promises. Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or if necessary, through the parents or guardians, to receive the sacrament of confirmation at the appropriate time." (par. 16)

## **Eucharist**

"The Eucharist is the most August sacrament... by which the Church constantly lives and grows ... The celebration of the Eucharist is the center of the entire Christian life." (par. 19)

"Parents, those who take the place of parents, and pastors are to see to it that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the Eucharist as early as possible. Pastors are to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of reason or whom the judge are not sufficiently disposed. It is important to note, however, that the criterion for reception of Holy Communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally.... existence of a disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from receiving the Eucharist." (par.20)

## **Reconciliation**

"Only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing serious sin. Nevertheless, even young children and persons with mental disabilities often are conscious of committing acts that are sinful to some degree and may experience a sense of guilt and sorrow. As long as the individual is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution." (par. 23)

It is also important to know that it is also possible for those with profound mental disabilities to participate in penitential services with the rest of the community, to the extent that they are able. (par. 23)

With people who have poor verbal communication skills, expression of repentance that is expressed through gestures is also appropriate. (par. 25)

## **Anointing the Sick**

“Since disability does not necessarily indicate an illness, Catholics with disabilities

should receive the sacrament of anointing on the same basis and under the same circumstances as any other member of the Christian faithful." (par. 28)

"The anointing of the sick may be conferred if the recipient has sufficient use of reason to be strengthened by the sacrament.. If there is any doubt as to whether the sick person has attained the use of reason, the sacrament is to be conferred." (par.29)

### **Holy Orders**

"The existence of a physical disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from holy orders. However, candidates for ordination must possess the necessary spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological qualities and abilities to fulfill the ministerial functions of the orders they receive." (par. 31)

### **Marriage**

"All persons not prohibited by law can contract marriage." (par. 35)

"For matrimonial consent to be valid, it is necessary that the contracting parties possess a sufficient use of reason; that they be free of any grave lack of discretion affecting their judgment about the rights and duties to which they are committing themselves; and that they be capable of assuming the essential obligations of the married state ... Pastors and other clergy are to decide cases on an individual basis and in the light of pastoral judgment based upon consultation with diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, and canonical, medical, and other experts." (par. 37)

From **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

1994

2276 "Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible."

**Pertaining to the Sacraments of Initiation**

1212 The Sacraments of Initiation- Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist-lay the *foundations* of every Christian life.

**Pertaining to Baptism**

1246 "Every person not yet baptized and only such a person is able to be baptized." (from the Code of Canon Law)

1269 Just as Baptism is the source of responsibilities and duties, the baptized person also enjoys the rights within the Church: to receive the sacraments, to be nourished with the Word of God and to be sustained by the other spiritual helps of the Church.

**Pertaining to Confirmation:**

1306 Every baptized person not yet confirmed can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation.

1308 Although Confirmation is sometimes called the "sacrament of Christian maturity", we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election and does not need ratification to become effective. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us of this:

*"Age of body does not determine age of soul. Even in childhood man can attain spiritual maturity. "*

1309 Preparation for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit- his actions, his gifts, and his biddings- in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. *To this end, catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ. the Universal Church as well as the parish community. The latter bears special responsibility for the preparation of the confirmands.*

**Pertaining to Eucharist:**

1391 "Holy Communion augments our union with Christ. The principle fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus."

1392 "Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, a flesh "given life and giving life through the Holy Spirit" preserves, increases and renews the life of grace received at Baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage... "

1396 "Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it, Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body-the Church."

From **Celebrating: Together: A Catholic Welcome to  
Persons with Disabilities**

Archdiocese of New York, 1993

"Ministry with people with disabilities is rooted in the sacred truth that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God."

"There can be no separate society, no separate family, no separate Church."

"Interdependence is the key. We are called to live as a community, dependent on God and one another for support and direction."

This document accepts that in all parishes in our Archdiocese, that persons with disabilities will participate in all aspects of parish life:

Ministry

Full parish membership

Religious education (which is the "RIGHT of Catholics")

Education

Extended services

From **General Directory for Catechesis**  
Congregation for the Clergy, 1997 (Latin), 1998 (English)

**Catechesis for the disabled and handicapped**

189 Every Christian community considers those who suffer handicaps, physical or mental, as well as other forms of disability - especially children - as persons particularly beloved of the Lord. A growth in social and ecclesial consciousness, together with an undeniable progress in specialized pedagogy, makes it possible for the family and other formative centers to provide adequate catechesis for these people, who, as baptized, have this right and, if non-baptized, because they are called to salvation. The love of the Father for the weakest of his children and the continuous presence of Jesus and His Spirit give assurance that every person, however limited, is capable of growth in holiness.

Education in faith, which involves family above all else, calls for personalized and adequate programs. It should take into account the findings of pedagogical research. It is most effectively carried out in the context of the integral education of the person. On the other hand, the risk must be avoided of separating the specialized catechesis from the general pastoral care of the community. It is therefore necessary that the community be made aware of such catechesis and be involved with it. The particular demands of this catechesis require a special competence from catechists and render their service more deserving.



## Characteristics of the Special Education Catechist

Catechists come in all shapes and sizes, and with all sorts of God-given talents. All of these talents can be used to make the task of helping students learn.

**This person MUST be ..** a person of faith, ever striving to be more aware of God's presence

- mature, and one who sees this task: as a real challenge, and part of the true ministry of the church
- free of the anxiety related to the responsibility of the task. Remember that it is merely the responsibility of the Catechist to "catechize". The student is the one who has to learn. Do your best, then leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit.
- generous with their time. There's no other choice. Ready-made materials aren't readily available, and have to be made, or modified from something already on the shelf.
- patient .... with the students, and with themselves.
- realistic about what each student can accomplish
- willing to work closely with the parents, and on occasion, with the teachers who work with the student during the week.
- someone who believes in the ability of the students to learn
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## **Organizing a Special Religious Education Program**

The first step is assessing the need for a full program in your parish. While a parish is required to provide religious education for each of its parishioners, it may not require a full in-class program. Other options include:

- providing formation programs for parishioners on an as-needed basis
- affiliating with another parish in a joint venture

Note, that if a parish is requested to provide for religious education for a child, if there is no teacher/program available, the parish has one year to provide one, according to Anne Coughlin, Director of the Archdiocesan Parish Advocacy Program.

### **Financing:**

Tuition (according to parish rate) and book fees are one way to go. Many of the materials used are the same as for the traditional religious education program.

### **Classroom Environment:**

This depends upon the level of programming, and the students in attendance. The rule of thumb is to have visuals that relate to the program content, and academic abilities of the students.

If you have youngsters who are highly distractible, keep the environment clutter-free.

In cases of students with physical disabilities, keep enough space for successful ambulation; make sure lighting is adequate; acoustics should be good.

In cases where a youngster may be self-abusive, watch out for sharps: scissors, staples, paint brushes, etc. Be careful of lit candles and the hot wax.

### **Student Groupings:**

There is no one-way to do this.

#### **Age and Size:**

Children know their peers. To put a 13 year old in the same class with a 7 year old may be a hurtful experience, even if both youngsters are being prepared for their First Communion.

#### **Level of Programming:**

Children can be placed in sacramental preparation and post-preparation classes.

#### **Skill Level:**

Can the children read? Are they verbal?

**Things You need to ask first:**

1. What are the needs of the children?
  - how many?
  - program level?
  - skill level?
  
2. What are the parish resources?
  - how many teachers/teacher-nights are available?
  - are there classroom assistants?
  - is there enough space?
  
3. Is the interest there for parents to participate as part of the learning team?

## Planning the Lessons

If you are following a curriculum established by an organized group (e.g. The Kennedy Curriculum) the task is easier. Follow the directions, keeping in mind:

1. Your level of comfort with the material
2. The abilities of your students
3. Available resources

If you **are not using a pre-established curriculum, and you are preparing a sacramental class:**

1. review archdiocesan guidelines for content to be covered
2. identify Christo-centric concepts, and start with Jesus. The chronology of His life; miracles relating to the Eucharistic
3. For each concept, identify the key "message" you want the children to grasp
4. Plan out the best way to deliver that message
5. Develop story, visuals, activity

If you are doing a class that is not preparing, even long term, for a sacrament, identify a Christo-centric theme, then follow #3-5 above.

Some themes: Life of Jesus  
Life of Mary  
Miracles  
Parables  
Friends of Jesus  
Gifts of the Holy Spirit  
Fruits of the Holy Spirit  
The Beatitudes

In ALL aspects of the Lesson Planning, plan for individual student, as well as group success.

## **Inclusion**

### **Inclusion is.....**

- All children learning together with necessary supports and services
- All children having their unique needs met in the same setting
- All children participating in all facets of school life
- An important part of every child's education
- Providing opportunities for friendships to develop
- All children attending their neighborhood school
- All children learning side-by-side even though they have some different educational goals
- Supporting regular education teachers
- Using innovative teaching strategies for children's varied learning styles
- Integrating related services in the regular classroom

### **Inclusion is NOT.....**

- Dumping children in regular classes without necessary supports and services
- Trading off quality for inclusion
- Doing away with or cutting back on special education services
- Ignoring each child's unique needs
- All children learning the same thing, and the same time, in the same way
- Expecting regular education teachers to teach without the support they need
- Sacrificing the education of typical children

## Resources

Blind: Xavier Society  
154 East 23rd St.  
New York, NY 10010 (212) 473-7800  
(Provides religion textbooks in Braille or large print)

Deaf: Sr. Janet Marchesani  
Catholic Center  
240 Church Street  
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601 452-1400, ext. 4211

Kennedy Program: The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program to Improve Catholic Religious Education for Children and Adults with Mental Retardation  
Department for Persons with Disabilities  
Diocese of Pittsburgh  
48 South 14th Street  
Pittsburgh, P A 15203

### Guidelines for the Celebration of Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities

Publication # 5-027  
United States Catholic Conference 1-800-235-8722

## Sources of Catholic Material

Pauline Media <http://www.pauline.org>

Also available through Carmelite Gift Store, Middletown

Paulist Press	997 Macarthur Blvd	"
	Mahwah, NJ 07430	"
Regina Press		"
St. Joseph Picture Books		"
Ave Maria Press P.O. Box 428, Notre Dame, IN 46556		