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Getting Beyond "Why": A Reflection on "To Act with Justice and Love Tenderly: Exploring the Church's Call for Inclusion"

Janice L Benton, OFS¹

The "Why" of Inclusion

In "To Act with Justice and Love Tenderly: Exploring the Church's Call for Inclusion," Dr. Michael Boyle addresses the "why" of including students with disabilities in Catholic schools, providing a framework of "what provides the impetus for Catholic schools to initiate and sustain programs for students with disabilities when there are financial inhibitors that are present?" Boyle provides a great service in outlining the teaching of recent popes and the U.S. Catholic bishops that offer a rationale for this "why," focusing on the principles of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) as well as statements relating to individuals with disabilities.

In his review of CST, Boyle stresses the foundational principle of the sanctity of life and the inherent dignity of each human person, as well as the right of all to participate. Out of this principle, Boyle asserts that "...all students in a Catholic school deserve the right to participate in a community that reflects the diversity of God's kingdom and is not reserved for students or families who fit a specific profile. In short, God calls us to community, and it is inconsistent that some are allowed access to that community and others are not." He challenges Catholic schools to "reflect on their policies and programs" to determine if they "promote the common good and allow for those things required for human decency." Boyle argues that under the principle of the preferential option for the poor and marginalized, "Catholic schools are called to find ways to reach the margins and...effectively include students with disabilities."

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In 1978, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a landmark Pastoral Statement on persons with disabilities that has provided guidance to parishes and dioceses for over 40 years (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1978). Since its founding by the U.S. bishops in 1982, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) has provided consultation, training, and resources to help implement the Pastoral Statement. As noted by Boyle, the Pastoral Statement has retained its relevance throughout these years. Boyle aptly points readers to the third paragraph of the Pastoral Statement, which addresses perceptions of differences and the ways in which each of us encounter individuals with disabilities, a crucial first step in opening Catholic school doors.

Throughout his analysis of the Pastoral Statement, Boyle identifies numerous ways in which Catholic schools and educators are called to action: (a) elementary and secondary schools to develop strategies to “best integrate students with disabilities into programs of regular education”; (b) diocesan offices to provide ongoing professional development; and (c) Catholic school educators to take proactive measures to create innovative approaches for including students with disabilities. He highlights what is for many the definitive teaching of the Pastoral Statement: “There can be no separate Church for people with disabilities. We are one flock that follows a single shepherd” (USCCB, 1978, p. 33).

Boyle’s review of the bishops’ and NCPD documents issued in later years identifies additional themes relevant to Catholic schools, including creating and paying for accessible environments, providing pastoral care, and recognizing the gifts individuals with disabilities bring to the life of the faith community. Two documents not mentioned in the article are the Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities (Sacramental Guidelines), 1995 and revised in 2017 (USCCB, 2017), and the NCPD Board Statement on Belonging (2017), approved in November 2016 and updated in 2017.

The NCPD Board Statement on Belonging has particular relevance to Catholic schools, acknowledging that disability is an ordinary part of life and calling each parish to “provide access into all aspects of the communal life of the Church, engaging in relationships and offering appropriate supports” (2017, n.p.).

The bishops issued their 1995 Sacramental Guidelines to address pastoral inconsistencies and the lack of understanding of Church teaching around the sacraments. Individuals with disabilities were being denied access to the sacraments, and clergy and pastoral leaders were uncertain how to respond pastorally to inquiries from individuals and families. The 2017 Sacramental Guidelines Revision addresses issues that have emerged since the original document, including the use of technology for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, supporting families who receive a prenatal diagnosis, and the reception of the Eucharist by individuals with Celiac disease, Alzheimer’s, and dementia. An opening paragraph added to the Revised Sacramental Guidelines (USCCB, 2017) reflects an emphasis on each person’s unique call by God to grow in holiness and live out

their vocation. The bishops note that “Participating in, and being nourished by, the grace of the sacraments is essential to this growth in holiness.” They also state unequivocally that “every parish community includes members with disabilities, and earnestly desires their active participation” (n.p.). This is significant as it acknowledges that people with disabilities are indeed part of every parish community, a fact often denied by pastors who claim “we have no people with disabilities in our parish.” Further, it emphasizes that parishes earnestly desire the active participation of their parishioners with disabilities, in contrast to the typical understanding that the desire for participation is on the part of the individual with the disability or their family members.

Current Realities and Challenges

Boyle poses many of the questions raised frequently by parents of children with disabilities who are seeking a Catholic education for their son or daughter: “If there are certain individuals that are missing from the community, what is the message that is being given?” and “If Catholic schools are the best type of education, an education that integrates Church teachings and faith development, why is this right being withheld from students with disabilities?” Parents further question how they can explain to their daughter or son with an intellectual disability (and to his or her siblings) that she or he can’t attend school with siblings or why they are being asked to pay for a ramp or aide on top of tuition fees.

Despite the clear teaching of our Holy Fathers and bishops articulated by Boyle, many individuals with disabilities are still denied an education in their parish schools. NCPD hears all too frequently from parents whose children have been turned away, often without any serious consideration of the request to enroll their child. They are told that there is no program for their child or no budget to pay for needed accommodations.

However, resources exist to help. In recent years, much has been done by Catholic universities and national organizations to provide training, certification, and resources to educators and administrators. Parent groups such as the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion have been established to provide training and guidance and to raise funds to assist schools in their inclusion efforts. The FIRE Foundation, the first-such parent group founded in 1996, continues to raise funds for the schools of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, and is sharing resources and expertise to assist other dioceses to establish FIRE affiliate programs.

Getting Beyond the “Why”

Boyle demonstrated persuasively why inclusion for students with disabilities is called for in Catholic schools. I would add further points for consideration:

Inclusion benefits the entire school and parish community, enabling students without disabilities to know individuals with diverse learning needs as peers and friends.

1. What lessons are students who are part of the school community being taught when their siblings and other children and youth with disabilities are being excluded? Is this truly reflective of who we are as Catholics?
2. Consider the goal of Catholic education and the desire to help educate students in their faith and bring them to a loving relationship with God. Reflect on whether there are people who would not benefit from this opportunity and how denying it to any individual can be justified.
3. In reflecting on paragraph three of the Pastoral Statement, Boyle notes that “The emphasis in this section...is on how one encounters ‘the other,’ those that have a perceived difference from the majority. The great challenge here is not on ‘normalizing the other’ by forcing compliance to the majority but on how one accepts our differences and ultimately recognizes the humanity in everyone.” Throughout this process, it is crucial to consider our own attitudes and assumptions and whether we consider a person with a disability as an individual with unique talents, interests, and personality.
4. Boyle emphasized an important point regarding each person’s place within the community when he stated, “The Church recognizes the unique call of community and the relationship of all individuals, including those with disabilities, to the Church.” I have written similar words countless times and likely even in this article. However, we are now at a point where the phrase “including those with disabilities” should not need stating. It is clear that individuals with disabilities are part of that above-referenced “all.”

As Boyle pointed out, the documents calling for access and welcome are decades old, including the bishops’ Pastoral Statement which celebrated 40 years in November 2018.

I respectfully suggest that It is time to accept the “why” as a given and move forward with the “how.”

Focus on the “How”

Boyle provided helpful actionable steps under three categories in order to help accomplish the “how”:

1. Professional Development
 - (a) Build knowledge and skills to effectively program for students with disabilities.
 - (b) Be familiar with Church documents as they provide an important explanation of “why” we must move forward with accessible/inclusive programming. I would note that there are, of course, other explanations, including:

- i. It is the right thing to do
 - ii. It is who we are as Church — we are living what we preach
 - iii. It increases enrollment
 - iv. It keeps families engaged instead of driving them away
 - v. It provides positive life lessons to all students rather than having them experience and believe that it is acceptable to exclude some individuals simply because they provide a challenge
2. Build Systems to Support Inclusion
 - (a) Boyle advises that Catholic schools utilize a systematic approach to creating inclusive programs. I would add that the approach should be systemic, integrated into all aspects of the school life.
 - (b) Boyle quoted from Gaudet (2017) that “we must also be mindful that an overemphasis on ‘special programs’ encourages segregation rather than integration” (p. 52). In General Principle #5 of the Revised Sacramental Guidelines, the bishops advise that “Parish catechetical and sacramental preparation programs may need to be adapted for some parishioners with disabilities, though, as much as possible, persons with disabilities should be integrated into the ordinary programs. They should not be segregated for specialized catechesis unless their disabilities make it impossible for them to participate in the basic catechetical program. Even in those cases, participation in parish life is encouraged in all ways possible” (USCCB, 2017, n.p.).
3. Conversion of the Heart
 - (a) Boyle emphasizes the need to focus on faith dispositions in addition to developing technical skills, noting that “the focus on the opportunities for conversion move programming from just meeting legal compliance to opportunities for a change in heart.”

While I agree with Boyle’s suggestions of self-reflection, retreats, and guided explorations of the Church documents, I also recommend gathering the perspectives of individuals with disabilities by talking with them and reading blogs and articles from disability-rights advocates, reflecting a more inclusive dynamic of working together versus the helper and helped mentality.

Boyle offers helpful guidance and challenges throughout his article. My only addition to his thoughtful conclusion is to urge Catholic school teachers, administrators, and other personnel to see the student as you see any other student without focusing or dwelling on the disability and to remember that well-documented Church teaching is without equivocation—all means all (Racunas,

2017). There is no alternative to inclusion. The only question going forward is the best way to accomplish that unequivocal inclusion.

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