

**OPENING HEARTS, MINDS AND DOORS:**  
*Embodying the Inclusive and Vulnerable Love of God*

Rev. Robert Barron  
Rev. Donald Senior, C.P.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Biographies: Cardinal Joseph Bernardin–Fr. Henri Nouwen	2
Executive Summary of White Paper	3
Abstract	5
Part I: Open Hearts	6
Part II: Open Minds	10
Part III: Open Doors	15
Conclusion	19
Biography: Fr. Robert Barron	20
Access to the Holy Land	21
Biography: Fr. Donald Senior, C.P.	27
What Churches Can Do to Welcome People with Disabilities	28
Reflection Questions	31
Statement of the U.S. Bishops	32
Resource List	34

---

The National Federation of Priests' Councils (NFPC) is a membership organization representing one hundred and fourteen councils of diocesan and religious clergy, totaling approximately twenty five thousand Roman Catholic priests. The National Board of the NFPC includes representatives from twenty-nine ecclesiastical provinces of the United States, four religious councils and the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus. The House of Delegates of the NFPC is a policy-setting body comprised of representatives of the member councils. The delegates meet annually.

**DISCLAIMER:** Material published under the auspices of the NFPC does not constitute endorsement by the NFPC and the author's views are not necessarily those of the NFPC.

Funding for this project provided by the NFPC and Pathways Awareness Foundation. Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors is a project of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Francis Cardinal George.

Reproduction of this document without the permission of the NFPC is prohibited.

© NFPC 1999 [Volume 10, Number 3]

Authors: Fr. Robert Barron &

Fr. Donald Senior, C.P.

Editorial Review: Bernard F. Stratman, SM

Design: Matthew Nutting

Send inquiries to: NFPC, 1337 W.

Ohio Street, Chicago, IL 60622-6490

Tel: 312/226-3334

Fax: 312/829-8915

E-Mail: [nfpc@nfpc.org](mailto:nfpc@nfpc.org)

Internet: [www.nfpc.org](http://www.nfpc.org)

ISBN: 1-893060-02-0



## BIOGRAPHIES

### Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

---

His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, became one of the most beloved leaders in the Catholic Church and a strong advocate for the inclusion into Liturgy and parish life of people with disabilities. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1952. After serving 14 years in the Diocese of Charleston, Bernardin became the youngest bishop in the United States in 1966 when he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Atlanta. Six years later, he became Archbishop of Cincinnati. In July 1982, he was appointed Archbishop of Chicago and was elevated to the College of Cardinals the following February. In 1983 Cardinal Bernardin was awarded the Albert Einstein Peace Award. Among his numerous writings is *Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons*. Cardinal Bernardin demonstrated his commitment to inclusion when he called a conference on inclusion that drew more than 700 priests and lay leaders together on April 22, 1996. At the Cardinal's request, Fr. Henri Nouwen gave a moving keynote speech at this event. Fr. Nouwen was the Cardinal's spiritual advisor and friend. About two months prior to his death in 1996, the Cardinal received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* was the Cardinal's final book.

### Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen

---

Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen was the energetic author of more than 30 spiritual books and an internationally celebrated speaker and teacher. Born and raised in the Netherlands, Nouwen was ordained a priest in 1957

---

before studying psychology at the University of Nijmegen and the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas. He later taught at Notre Dame University, Yale Divinity School and Harvard University. Nouwen then became involved with L'Arche, an international movement of communities that welcome people with disabilities. In 1986 he became pastor of Daybreak in Toronto, Canada, a community where people who have developmental disabilities live with friends. Nouwen was assigned to assist Adam Arnett, a man with severe disabilities who would later become his "best" teacher. Nouwen died on September 21, 1996 in Hilversum, Holland. Cardinal Bernardin and Henri Nouwen were long-time friends. Nouwen's final book, *Sabbatical Journey*, refers to the April 22, 1996 inclusion conference from which this white paper draws.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### The Church as Wounded Love: An Icon of Christ

---

There is a story told about Teresa of Avila. One day the devil appeared to her in the guise of the risen Christ. Immediately seeing through the ruse, the saint dismissed Satan. But before Satan left he asked the saint, "how did you know that I was an impostor?" The reply came: "because you have no wounds." The redeeming wounds of Christ strengthen us as a Church with vulnerable members.

When the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, Christ showed them the terrible marks of crucifixion on his hands and sides. Though Christ had conquered death and moved through the Father's power to an exalted level of existence, the risen Christ showed the signs of vulnerability and powerlessness that branded him in this world. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul can sing the power of God in what appears to us to be

---



the ultimate weakness: the scandal of the cross.

In all of this we see something at the very heart of the Christian Gospel: the God revealed in the crucified and risen Jesus is not the indifferent absolute of Greek philosophy, but rather **a force of vulnerable and compassionate love, a God strong enough to be weak.**

Just as Jesus shows forth the reality of the Father, so the Church mirrors the stance and style of Jesus. **We the Church are therefore an "icon" of Christ, a sacred picture of his love.** This means that we cannot live in accordance with the values and ideals of a sinful world. We cannot be animated by the self-confident and self-reliant individualism so cherished by our society. Rather we must be a counter-cultural community characterized by our willingness to help each other, to offer our strength to each other, and perhaps even more importantly, to offer our weakness and humility to the strength of another.

Inclusion is the participation of people with disabilities in the full life and worship of the Church. This inclusion is not so much a matter of "doing good" for people in need as bodying forth what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ. We want to "include" those with visible disabilities in Liturgy and Church life. We "include" not simply so that they can be cared for more adequately, but much more in order that they can bring their strength of body and soul to care for others living with less visible disabilities. Inclusion may mean affirming a person's gifts through participation on the altar, communicating in large print materials and multi-sensory ways, and providing accessibility to the church and altar.

Henri Nouwen tells the story of his relationship with Adam, a young man of the L'Arche Community who experienced profound physical disability. **What the spiritual master discovered in the course of this work is that Adam ministered to him, bringing a strength of**

---

**soul and naming and caring for various psychological and spiritual disabilities that had remained hidden.** Each offered strength that the other lacked; each bore a burden of the other.

What we see encapsulated **in Nouwen's story is the Church, icon of Jesus, the community willing to live in mutuality, interdependence and compassion,** the family committed to helping each other. And this is why in reaching out to include people with disabilities in the full life and prayer of the Church, we are challenging the assumptions of the world, and we are becoming more fully the image of compassionate love that the Lord Jesus wants us to be.

The risen Christ shows his vulnerability, and so we his Church proudly show the wounded strength which is love. It is this love that animates the work of inclusion.

## ABSTRACT

---

**Fr. Robert Barron examines Fr. Henri Nouwen's theological framework** for inclusion of people with disabilities into the Catholic Liturgy. The *first* section describes a pivotal experience in Fr. Nouwen's life, when a young man without speech, Adam, became the best teacher about Christ's unconditional love for us. *Second*, as Adam modeled Christ's own vulnerability on the cross, God's love for our own human vulnerabilities is explored. *Third*, the focus turns to the work of the Spirit in the community of faith when all are included. Readers are encouraged to take steps toward inclusion, based on the experiences of parishes who participate in the inclusion movement inspired by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. In the last part, **Fr. Donald Senior, C.P., clearly highlights the powerful effects of inclusion as he describes his journey to the Holy Land.**

---

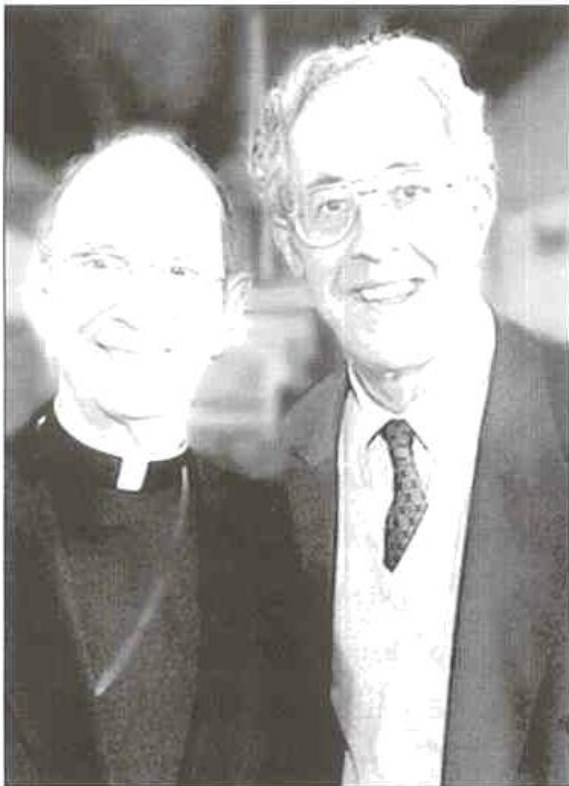


**“When we open our hearts and our community to the gifts each person brings, we are all strengthened.”**

~Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

## **PART I: OPEN HEARTS**

### Affirmation of Abilities



*Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Fr. Henri Nouwen gave their insights and guidance to the inclusion of people with disabilities at the 1996 Inclusion Conference called by Cardinal Bernardin.*

Today, many people with disabilities are unintentionally excluded from worship—by invisible barriers such as attitudes and language, and visible barriers such as stairs and small print missals and hymnals. This exclusive atmosphere can result in the diminishment of identity as Catholic Christians and a compromising of our witness. Our hearts, our minds, our doors must open because our God’s love excludes no one. God is a power of inclusion. **Inclusion in churches means offering people with disabilities the same respect and opportunities, such as serving in Liturgy and church life, as to all people.** Adults and children with disabilities and their families all benefit from being warmly

embraced and affirmed by the church. Inclusion allows their gifts to be affirmed in community and received by us all.

**In 1996, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin reminded us that one in five Americans has a disability—physical, mental or sensory.** Recognizing this statistic's impact on the Church, the Archdiocese of Chicago, in partnership with Pathways Awareness Foundation, committed to inviting persons with disabilities into full participation in the life of the Catholic community. That commitment continues today under Cardinal Francis George. A few Archdiocesan activities are Inclusion Sundays, parish councils' "how-to" presentations, and quarterly helpful newsletters to priests and lay leaders facilitated by Pathways Awareness Foundation.

This kind of commitment is a value for the Church as a whole, and it is when all of us—rich and poor, great and small, ordinary and extraordinary—come together that the full glory of God is disclosed and the deepest identity of the Church is realized. We advocate the reaching out to people with disabilities because they have much to teach and share. The more we celebrate each others' gifts, the more we help each other grow.

***“What is my life? Your life and my life is an interruption of eternity, just a little interruption.”***

***“Life is an opportunity to thank God for eternal love or for something painful drawing us closer to God’s heart.”***

~Fr. Henri Nouwen



---

## Fr. Henri Nouwen and Adam

---

Inclusion has the power to change lives. In a remarkable keynote address at the Inclusion Conference in Chicago in April 1996, just months before his death, Fr. Henri Nouwen spoke of his experience with L'Arche, a community for people with disabilities in Toronto. Nouwen was charged with caring four hours a day for a young man named Adam who used a wheelchair, experienced frequent epileptic seizures and was incapable of bathing, feeding or dressing himself without assistance.

Nouwen said that at first he shrank from the seeming difficulty of the task. But as Nouwen aided Adam day after day, Adam profoundly helped Nouwen, moving the theologian into a spiritual place he had never been before. In Adam's vulnerability and willingness to be loved, Nouwen sensed his own deep woundedness—often covered by his success and accomplishments as a theologian associated with great faculties at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard as well as an author of 30 books.

**“Adam taught me that being is more important than doing,” said Nouwen. “I wanted to do many things, and Adam said ‘be with me, just be with me.’ Adam told me that the heart is much more important than the mind. The human person is more than a person who is bright and can think, the human person can love, give love and receive love.”**

In essence, Nouwen allowed a person with disabilities to renew his sense of what it is to be the church, to reawaken to the joy of Christ's love.

---



*People with disabilities creatively address their needs and serve society in many ways, yet they often desire a greater opportunity to be involved in religious activities. You can help.*

“When we speak of God’s vulnerability in Jesus, I realized that Adam was Jesus coming to me again. Adam, who had been loved by God for all eternity, was sent to us just for 34 years. He died to go home and praise God and leave behind his community of love, of people he touched,” said Nouwen. “Hundreds came from many directions to attend Adam’s funeral and to say, ‘Thank God for Adam and his community of love.’”

**“The great mystery of our faith is that we get closest to God when we are willing to be vulnerable, when we are willing to say, ‘I need somebody else.’”**

*~Fr. Henri Nouwen*

So Nouwen, the great writer and theologian, felt that Adam, a man the world would likely overlook, became for him both professor of theology and spiritual master. As leaders in the Catholic Church, bishops and priests can open the hearts and minds of their parishioners by asking people with disabilities to serve as role models on the altar or in church life. As did Christ, humble leaders understand their own divine gifts and abilities and therefore value highly the gifts each person brings from the Lord.



**“And as we move into the next century, that’s the message for the church: to be a people of God in which His spirit works and keeps calling everybody in—the poor and the blind and the weak and the broken. They are the heart of the church . . .”**

*~Fr. Henri Nouwen*

## **PART II: OPEN MINDS**

### The Vulnerable God of Christianity

---

Fr. Henri Nouwen saw and understood God’s own vulnerability, as embodied in Jesus, in Adam. In fact, it is the same strange and surprising understanding of God that provides the most profound justification for radical inclusivity in the Church. We Christians believe, not so much in the God of the philosophers, but in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that divine power revealed in the life ministry, dying and rising of Jesus of Nazareth.

For us, the image of our Lord is the invisible God, the most authentic revealer of the being of the Divine. Our Lord is a humble friend, a man who reached out in love to all. In Jesus of Nazareth, Christians sense the God who does not remain sequestered in His perfect heaven but who offers Himself in compassion for the whole of creation. **“Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at . . . rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave.” (Ph. 2:6-7)**

---

What Paul sings is the truth at the heart of Christianity: God's real perfection, His capacity to become small for the sake of the universe He has made.

Jesus radiates this paradoxical perfection in his embrace of the poor, women, tax collectors, children and people with disabilities—all those whom the society of his day deemed unclean or unworthy of affection. To the self-righteous who claimed to be defending their own "purity" and that of God, he shouted, "... the tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of God before you!" **Embodying God's compassion, especially for those most forgotten, was far more important to Jesus than cultivating a self-regarding holiness.** In short, Jesus announced not the God of exclusive perfection, but the God whose real perfection is inclusive love.

---

### Visible Signs of Vulnerability

---

When the risen Jesus returns to the Upper Room after his resurrection, he greets his astounded disciples with the simple word Shalom (peace) and then he does something remarkable: he shows them his hands and his side. He shows them the wounds that he continues to bear. The risen Jesus, now passed beyond this life into the realm of his Father's glory, still bears the signs of his weakness and vulnerability. In other words, at the very heart of God is wounded, and dare I say it, disabled love.

---



## The Vulnerable God and the Inclusive Church



*Inclusion in churches means giving people with disabilities the opportunity to serve in Liturgy and worship life as altar servers, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, ushers, musicians, committee members, etc.*

It is from this rich spiritual ground that the Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors movement emerges. For too long, many persons with disabilities have not been encouraged to participate fully in the life and worship of the Catholic Church, and this has resulted in a diminishment of our identity and a compromising of our witness.

When persons with disabilities share more completely in the life of the Church, the community of interdependent love to which we aspire comes to richer expressions.

But there is more to it than that. **Those walking the vulnerable journey are precisely those who symbolize most dramatically the vulnerable love which is God. A community formed by the God of Jesus Christ wants to bring them into the light and celebrate them as privileged signs. They, in the richest sense, are**

**the teachers and doctors,** the ones who in their very neediness and openness to love, know the heart of God with perhaps the greatest insight and humility.

## Visible and Invisible Disabilities

---

**“One of the greatest gifts of people with visible disabilities is that they help those who have invisible disabilities to get in touch with them...to realize that I am impatient, that I am full of anxieties and fears, that I have my addictions, that I have my broken relationships, that I am poor. I can confess that in the community of faith because God says, ‘Blessed are the poor.’ He didn’t say, ‘Blessed are those who care for the poor.’ God said if you come to the altar with a pure heart, there’s an enormous blessing there for you, too.”**

*~Fr. Henri Nouwen*

Another tremendously important theme that Nouwen developed in his Chicago keynote address is that people with visible disabilities help us get in touch with our poverty of spirit (invisible disabilities). They can be teachers for all of us with our invisible spiritual disabilities. Church is the work of the spirit when we are all called together to love, to conversion. The blessing is there when we all confess our poorness or humanness. Lay and religious leaders can provide a loving example of how to offer spiritual, physical and moral affirmation to all people with invisible disabilities and their caregivers.

We all have strengths and gifts; we all have weaknesses or vulnerabilities. Some physical or mental invisible disabilities do not appear publicly or obviously. Few people in a congregation may know or

---



acknowledge these special needs that are common in our society. People with physical disabilities or differences offer testimony to the strength of the Spirit within all of us. Special needs may include:

- ❖ Learning disabilities
- ❖ Multiple sclerosis
- ❖ Cancer—in its many forms
- ❖ Low vision; blind
- ❖ Asthma
- ❖ Cardiac conditions
- ❖ Muscular dystrophy
- ❖ Stuttering; or word finding
- ❖ Chronic arthritis
- ❖ AIDS/HIV
- ❖ Mental illness; depression
- ❖ Glaucoma
- ❖ Chronic pain
- ❖ Diabetes or juvenile diabetes
- ❖ Hard-of-hearing; deafness
- ❖ Osteoporosis
- ❖ Balance issues
- ❖ Many others

Though unseen, all of these vulnerabilities are eminently real. One of the greatest ministries that persons with disabilities perform is to remind the entire community of the strength of the Lord in our time of need — of the ability to give love and to receive love. Persons with disabilities can become, in a very concrete way, humble professors of theology in the midst of the body of Christ.

***“God created you with unimaginable gifts. It is the affirmation of others that makes that gift possible. You only know you have a gift when there is someone to say ‘Thank you’. . . Affirmation creates community.”***

*~Fr. Henri Nouwen*

## **PART III: OPEN DOORS**

### Affirmation



*When churches affirm the gifts people with disabilities bring, they encourage all people to play an active role in the life of the church.*

It is most appropriate that persons with disabilities are present around the Eucharistic table as servers, deacons, communion ministers, etc. What the Church holds up at Mass—both in Word and Sacrament—is the body of Jesus that we are called to become. But this body, as Paul reminds us, is made up of many parts and characterized by a diversity of gifts.

Beyond the Sacrament, we can affirm the value of persons with disabilities through verbal and non-verbal signs.

Forming a well-rounded sub-committee on inclusion is an important first step toward affirmation. The committee could prioritize inclusion improvements and recommendations about the Liturgy and church life for the pastor and parish council.



Other affirmation suggestions include:

1. Encouraging people with disabilities to serve others as altar servers, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, ushers, musicians, committee members, etc.
2. Welcoming children with special needs in religious education classes (ask parents how)
3. Moving meetings to the ground floor so all can attend
4. Training of ushers and lay leaders by persons with disabilities so leaders can become appropriate role models for inclusion
5. Creating a "How to Make Better Inclusion" box for suggestions from the parish community

---

### Communication

**"Communication begins with an open mind. When we unite with one another in a community of love, we learn to communicate in open, caring ways. We need to be sensitive to how we communicate with one another, with our children, with ourselves."**

*~Joseph Cardinal Bernardin*

Inclusive communication means using language that puts a person first before his or her disability. For example, "a man who uses a wheelchair" is people-first language; "wheelchair-bound man" is not. Inclusive communication, written and oral, is a key component to assisting people with disabilities to participate in church life and Liturgy.

Using the term "a person with disabilities" and eliminating terms such as "disabled person," "stroke victim," "cripple," or "handicapped" during Mass homilies is particularly important. Inclusive communication also includes providing and using:

- ❖ Large print for all prayer books, missals, music and bulletins (Braille available)
- ❖ Sign-language interpreters
- ❖ People-first language which puts the person first and the disability second. For example, "people with disabilities," not handicapped
- ❖ Accessibility logo
- ❖ A good amplifying sound system such as FM wireless or loaned hearing aids
- ❖ Good lighting, lights on speakers' faces
- ❖ Audio tapes of mass or of the homily
- ❖ TDD in the church office
- ❖ Homilies with theological insights about inclusion
- ❖ Various verbal, visual, dramatic and musical techniques for different learning styles

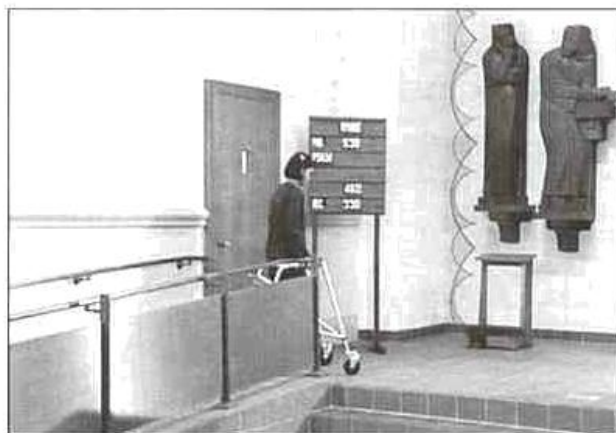




## Accessibility

**“We can do no great things, only small things with great love. Together, these small things will add up to monumental change.”**

*~Mother Theresa*



*Changes in access to our churches and buildings benefit us all . . . people with strollers, people with a temporary cast, crutches, cane or wheelchair as well as people needing accessibility on a more permanent basis.*

To open our churches to encourage full participation by all people, we must make them physically accessible.

Accessibility means not only the larger efforts like building a ramp to the altar, but also the inexpensive, but equally important efforts such as removing front kneelers for people with mobility impairments.

Changes in access benefit all of us. Examples of accessibility adaptations include:

- ❖ Including a person who uses a wheelchair, walker or crutches on a committee for renovation and addition, or parents of a child with a mobility condition
- ❖ Building ramps to the altar and into the church, or installing an elevator



*Curb Cuts*



*Accessible Bathrooms*

- ❖ Providing an accessible bathroom with wheelchair facilities
- ❖ Providing accessible parking closest to the church entrance
- ❖ Removing front kneelers for persons with walkers, canes, etc.
- ❖ Adding curb cuts and push plates for independent opening

## CONCLUSION

As Christ's followers, bishops and priests are the humble leaders of the Catholic community and are responsible to encourage the gifts people with disabilities bring to all of us. For persons with disabilities are, in the richest sense, the teachers and doctors, the ones who know the heart of God with perhaps the greatest insight. And they are precisely those people who symbolize most dramatically the love which is God. By opening our hearts, minds and doors to people with disabilities, we are fulfilling the Church's message of a family of interdependent love. In imitation of the Trinitarian God, the Catholic Christian family is a play of giving and taking, supporting and being supported, calling and responding. Welcoming people with disabilities into full participation allows us all to benefit from this interplay and work toward our fullest potential as a Church and as church leaders.



## About Fr. Robert Barron

---

Father Robert Barron is an associate professor of philosophy and systematic theology at Mundelein Seminary outside of Chicago. Fr. Barron has published several books and numerous journal articles on theology and spirituality. Most recently, Crossroad published his books, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* in 1998 and *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, in 1996. Barron received the first prize for spirituality from the Catholic Press Association for *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, in 1997. Barron pursued doctoral studies in theology at the Institut Catholique de Paris, receiving his degree with a mention of très honorable in June 1992.



*Since 1987, Fr. Don Senior has led six study trips to Israel for persons with disabilities. Here the group explores Bethlehem.*

## **ACCESS TO THE HOLY LAND**

*By Fr. Donald Senior, C.P.*

Few places are more inaccessible than the Holy Land. The terrain is rugged and uneven. Many of the shrines and ancient monuments were constructed long before people thought about ramps and elevators. Even the city streets have steps. Because that part of the world has seen a tragic dose of violence and warfare it has more than its share of amputations and persons with disabilities. Public awareness about such questions, however, has been slow to awaken.

Yet this is the Holy Land, the place where our Scriptures were formed



and where the story of our faith began. For centuries pilgrims have made the trek to the Holy Land, in good times and bad. A few years ago when I was teaching a course on "Sickness, Healing and Disability in Biblical Perspective" at Catholic Theological Union, I invited several persons with disabilities to be resources for the class, helping us understand from their experience how our biblical heritage could offer a message of inclusion and liberation for all peoples. During the course, the students learned that CTU had an overseas study program in Israel. "When are we going to go?" Some of my friends with disabilities asked. I thought of the maze of slopes and steps that would greet us there and at first wondered if it could be done. But driven by the mounting enthusiasm of my friends, we decided to do it. Why should someone who happens to be paralyzed or blind or hearing impaired be denied such an opportunity?

**In September 1998 we completed our sixth study trip to Israel for persons with disabilities. We were 34 persons in all, 14 persons with disabilities, 12 of whom used wheelchairs.** They came from all over the country and as a condition for going on the trip, each is involved in his or her community in some public way and promises to pass on what they learned from the trip. They were as varied as any group might be: Vicki Kerkvleit, who works as a counselor for vocational rehabilitation in Sioux Falls, SD, and has brittle bone disease; Julie Wessel, who heads the entire computer division for a special Naval College in Maryland and is completely paralyzed from spinal muscular atrophy; Darwin Ziegler, an English major from Philadelphia with cerebral palsy; Sarah Davidson, mother of five from Dubuque, Iowa and a recent graduate from Clarke College, who is

considering a second career as a teacher and has rheumatoid arthritis. The list could go on—a remarkable group of determined and glorious travelers, each with unique talents and each with a story to tell.

Each person had an able bodied partner, and we also had a nurse and an “engineer” (a priest from Australia who had been a marine engineer and could fix anything on the spot from a broken axle to a malfunctioning lift). For equipment, we had a special bus with a hydraulic lift (one of two such in Israel), two portable ramps we carried with us to tackle those steps and curbs, a tool chest, and a medicine cabinet. I had the privilege of being the guide in Israel and briefing the group on the historical and biblical background of the places we visited.

Before we left a friend of mine who had been to Israel and thought we were crazy to go said, “But you won’t see much with such a group!” Little did he know! **We visited everything that other groups do and then some.** We marched through the Damascus Gate into the crowded market streets of the Old City of Jerusalem. We celebrated Sunday Mass in the Holy Sepulchre (at the Mary Magdalene altar where we reflected on how often in the Gospels Jesus draws into the center people like Mary that others keep on the margins). We climbed to the top of the Mount of Beatitudes where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount and took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. We explored the Judean desert and took the funicular to the top of Herod’s desert fortress at Masada. We posted more than 1,200 miles on the bus and worked our way into every major biblical and historical site.

**We have one important rule for the trip: wherever we go we go together,** bound as one by our determination to gain access to the places we wanted to see. **We do not view this trip as able**





*The CTU group uses one of the two portable ramps that they brought to Israel to negotiate otherwise inaccessible areas such as these steps near the ancient Temple wall.*

**bodied people doing something nice for people with disabilities. We are in it together, each person contributing something, all of us helping each other on our journey.** Sometimes we met stiff challenges. The water level was low on the Sea of Galilee so we had to enlist the Israeli sailors to help us construct a makeshift ramp to get the wheelchairs over the side of the boat. As we stretched every muscle to get on board, one of our group shouted out: “Don’t worry, this is where Jesus walked on the water!” The terrain in the newly excavated site of Caesarea Maritima (where Peter met Cornelius and Paul was imprisoned for two years) was particularly rugged as we bounced

across foundations of first century buildings just coming to light in the past few months of excavations. The steps down to the crypt of the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem are treacherous—narrow, steep, and made slick by centuries of pilgrim feet.

“Should we try it together or not?” I asked our group. On every trip I have made, the answer is the same: we are going to do it. There is something magnetic about this spot where Jesus was born. Sliding

down on their buttocks or carried in a makeshift blanket sling, or held up by two partners on each side, every member of our group sweated and strained down that flight of stairs. With tears in every eye, they touched the place in the cave where Jesus was born and where God embraced our human flesh with all of its glory and all of its limitations.

**We consider our trip a mission. A mission to visit the Holy Land and to learn about our Jewish and Christian heritage, certainly. But also a mission to demonstrate that every place and every community can be accessible if we are committed in heart and mind to making it so.**

We found that our group was giving example wherever we went. The flight crew on Lufthansa was supportive and helpful, and they also learned more about how to address the needs of persons with disabilities on a transatlantic flight (with some persuasion they now carry an aisle chair on-board so people can go to the bathroom en route). At Yad Veshem, the gripping Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, a soldier broke ranks from his fellow troops to get the phone number of our lift bus (he didn't know there was such a thing in Israel). At Capernaum, the town where Jesus spent most of his public ministry, a Jewish guide from the Golan Heights told us he had a brother who had lost both his legs and because of that all his life the guide had wanted to lead groups of Israelis with disabilities but didn't think it could be done. We spent 20 minutes giving him all the information we could. An Irish pilgrim came up to us in the Holy Sepulchre after Mass and said she had taken persons with disabilities to Lourdes and Rome but had never dared to think of Israel and now she was encouraged to do so.

---



**A special moment of triumph came at the great Western Wall plaza** (sometimes called the “Wailing Wall”), a place sacred to Jews because they can pray near the very stones of the great Temple wall destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. But this same place is also sacred to Christians, because this is the temple where Jesus prayed, and to Muslims because they believe that from this temple mount Mohammed ascended into heaven.

Security is extremely tight there and access difficult because of a steep incline to enter the plaza. No buses or cars are allowed near it. But with the help of our Druze driver and the charm our group radiated to the security guard who came on-board our bus to check us out, we persuaded the officials to open a gate reserved only for the highest officials during state visits. **With a great flourish and a military escort, our bus crammed with chairs, ramps and 34 beaming pilgrims, entered right into the middle of the plaza—a place no tour bus had ever gone before!** It was a symbol of the whole trip—we had access, into the heart of Jerusalem, into the place so sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

All of us are back home now, but we will never be quite the same. Long after the dust of Israel has been brushed off our chairs, the memory of that journey will inspire us. As David Walker, one of our participants with disabilities said, this was the trip of a lifetime not just because we visited the Holy Land but because everybody traveled together in love and respect as one people. “Because of that love,” he said, “this trip was possible.”

## About Fr. Donald Senior, C.P.

---

Fr. Donald Senior, C.P., is president of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, the largest Roman Catholic graduate school of ministry in the United States, where he is also a member of the faculty as professor of New Testament. Senior has led six trips to the Holy Land for people with disabilities since 1987.

Senior has published extensively on biblical topics, with numerous books and articles for both scholarly and popular audiences. He is the general editor of the acclaimed *Catholic Study Bible* and editor in chief of *The Bible Today*. In 1994, Senior was the recipient of the National Catholic Library Association's Jerome Award for Outstanding Scholarship. He also was given the 1996 National Catholic Education Association's Bishop Loras Lane Award for outstanding service of Catholic education. Senior is a member of the Passionist Congregation and was ordained a priest in 1967. He received his doctorate in New Testament studies from the University of Louvain in Belgium in 1972.



## WHAT CHURCHES CAN DO TO WELCOME PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

---

For any parish to make long-lasting, appropriate changes, a planning structure will be needed.

Establish a well-rounded committee by recruiting members with a wide range of personal experiences, skills and responsibilities, including people with disabilities. The committee can serve as a task force on human concerns focusing on disability issues. If possible, include people who have:

- ❖ various types of disabilities or their family members;
- ❖ responsibility to plan and lead worship and for education, especially special education;
- ❖ responsibility for managing the building;
- ❖ skills in carpentry, contracting, architecture or writing;
- ❖ responsibility for community outreach and fund-raising.

At the first meeting, discuss experiences within the parish that may be creating barriers for people with disabilities and for their families as well as opportunities for inclusion. *Make lists of accessibility issues and inclusion possibilities.*

Conduct an audit of parish organizations and activities and ask questions, such as:

- ❖ Do any parish organizations currently address the needs of persons with disabilities?

- ❖ Do parish programs, celebrations and initiatives include people with disabilities as participants?
- ❖ Could we survey parishioners at Church on a given Sunday?\*

At subsequent meetings, consider policies and practices which could be viewed as discouraging to someone with a disability, *such as asking everyone to stand and kneel or holding services in areas that are not easily accessible*. Refer recommendations to the appropriate church authority.

1. *Strategize about fund-raising* on a timeline of years (Phase 1, Phase 2, etc.). Ideas could range from urging the youth group to sponsor a program, to inviting families to contribute money for a ramp or enhanced sound system in memory of a family member.

2. Plan to make both *short-term and long-range strategies to increase accessibility and inclusion*. Remember that making changes at one point in time does not necessarily answer the need forever. Devices may break and well-intended adjustments sometimes prove to be inadequate, while new ideas and requests will continue.

3. Plan parish projects such as running soup kitchens or making nursing home visits in *accessible* locations.

\*For a free sample church survey, call *Pathways Awareness Foundation* at 800-955-2445.



4. Consider planning a special service with inclusion as the focal theme of worship. Ask members with a range of disabilities to take leadership roles, appropriately demonstrating their various abilities.

5. Consider "standing or seated" or "kneeling or seated" or "as you are able" instead of "congregation stands" or "congregation kneels." Hand motions for standing or sitting also work.

6. Train ushers in the ways of inclusion, in consultation with people with disabilities. When appropriate, have them offer parishioners audio loops or loaned hearing aids, large-print or Braille bulletins and large-print prayer books and hymnals (or use only large-print bulletins, prayer books and hymnals). Station someone near heavy swinging doors to assist.

7. Use large-print bulletins, prayer books and hymnals for all parishioners. Place welcoming bulletin notes about inclusion. Welcome new parishioners with special needs.

8. Transportation is a major barrier for someone with mobility or sight impairment. To provide personal choice and control, when possible, give the person with a disability a list of willing drivers. If possible, provide a van with a wheelchair lift and a pool of dedicated drivers. Arrange neighborhood carpools. Reserve parking places near the ramped entrances for people with mobility impairments.

*These suggestions were found in "That All May Worship," a book from the National Organization on Disability (telephone 202-293-5960).*

---

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

---

1. Think about the first time you interacted, as a priest, with a person with a disability. How did you feel? How do you think that person felt?
2. Disabilities can be visible and invisible. List examples of disabilities that make parishioners vulnerable.
3. Are there special needs you have that make you vulnerable?
4. If a person with a disability asked to participate in Liturgy, how could you accommodate him or her?
5. What barriers do you see keeping clergy and laity from reaching out to persons with disabilities?
6. What additional help do you need to reach out to people with disabilities and who can offer this help?
7. How can you help others see past these barriers to solutions?
8. How can people with disabilities bring you closer to God?
9. As a leader in the Catholic faith, what can you do to promote inclusion?

To receive a free newsletter from *Pathways Awareness Foundation*, call 800-955-2445.



## **WELCOME AND JUSTICE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: A FRAMEWORK OF ACCESS AND INCLUSION**

Statement of the U.S. Bishops

---

Twenty years ago we issued a statement calling for inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church and community. In 1982 the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities was established to promote this ministry. And in 1995 we strengthened our commitment with passage of the *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*.

This moral framework is based upon Catholic documents and serves as a guide for contemplation and action. We hope that the reaffirmation of the following principles will assist the faithful in bringing the principles of justice and inclusion to the many new and evolving challenges confronted by persons with disabilities today.

1. We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.
2. Each person is created in God's image, yet there are variations in individual abilities. Positive recognition of these differences discourages discrimination and enhances the unity of the Body of Christ.
3. Our defense of life and rejection of the culture of death requires that we acknowledge the dignity and positive contributions of our brothers and sisters with disabilities. We unequivocally oppose negative attitudes toward disabilities which often lead to abortion, medical rationing, and euthanasia.
4. Defense of the right to life implies the defense of all other rights which enable the individual with the disability to achieve the fullest

measure of personal development of which he or she is capable. These include the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, and in health care, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities and services.

5. Parish liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.

6. Since the parish is the door to participation in the Christian experience, it is the responsibility of both pastors and laity to assure that those doors are always open. Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty.

7. We must recognize and appreciate the contribution persons with disabilities can make to the Church's spiritual life, and encourage them to do the Lord's work in the world according to their God-given talents and capacity.

8. We welcome qualified individuals with disabilities to ordination, to consecrated life, and to full-time, professional service in the Church.

9. Often families are not prepared for the birth of a child with a disability or the development of impairments. Our pastoral response is to become informed about disabilities and to offer ongoing support to the family and welcome to the child.

10. Evangelization efforts are most effective when promoted by diocesan staff and parish committees which include persons with disabilities. Where no such evangelization efforts exist, we urge that they be developed.



We join the Holy Father in calling for actions which “ensure that the power of salvation may be shared by all” (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 16). Furthermore, we encourage all Catholics to study the original U.S. bishops and Vatican documents from which these principles were drawn.

Copyright © 1998, United States Catholic Conference, Inc., Washington, D.C. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder. To order *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities* in its official published format, contact the USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 800-235-8722.

## RESOURCE LIST

### **Pathways Awareness Foundation**

Chicago, IL 60606

800-955-2445

888-795-5884 (fax)

800-326-8154 (TDD)

[www.pathwaysawareness.org](http://www.pathwaysawareness.org)

*Pathways Awareness Foundation was established in 1989. The Foundation's mission is to raise public and professional awareness about early detection, early intervention and inclusion of children and youth with physical challenges. Pathways has produced:*

- *The Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors video—20 minutes featuring Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Father Henri Nouwen—available for the NFPC price of \$10; and*

- *Father Henri Nouwen's talk, "The Vulnerable Journey" as an edited book and audio tape (45 minutes)—available for \$7.*

### **ADA Cost Catalog for Access Modification**

800-341-7874 ext. 347

### **Elizabeth Ministry**

200 E. Bethany Drive  
Allen, TX 75002

800-822-6701

800-688-8356 (fax)

[www.rclweb.com](http://www.rclweb.com)

*Elizabeth Ministry is a wonderful way for your parish to reach out to women during times of pregnancy, birth, adoption, infant crisis, miscarriage and infertility.*

### **National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities**

P.O. Box 29113  
Washington, DC 20017

202-529-2933 (voice/TDD)

202-529-4678 (fax)

[www.ncpd.org](http://www.ncpd.org)

*The National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities provides and assists in the development of efforts to promote meaningful participation of those with disabilities by supplying resources and consultation.*

### **National Organization on Disability**

Religion and Disability Program  
910 16th Street NW, Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20006

202-293-5960

202-293-5968 (TDD)

202-293-7999 (fax)

[www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org)

*The National Organization on Disability provides opportunities to increase participation of people with disabilities in communities. The NOD publishes "That All May Worship."*



**Xavier Society**

154 E. 23rd St.  
New York, NY 10010

800-637-9193 or  
212-473-7800

*Xavier Society provides free Braille and large print missals and bibles.*

---

**SUGGESTED READING AND VIEWING**

---

**Resources on the Catholic Church and Disabilities**

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Vulnerable Journey*. Chicago: Pathways Awareness Foundation, 1997. 800-955-2445

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Sabbatical Journey*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998.

Lalonde Benton, Janice and Mary Jane Owen. *Opening Doors To People With Disabilities Volume I: Pastoral Manual*. Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities, 1995. 202-529-2933

**Resources on the Rights of People with Disabilities**

Lalonde Benton, Janice. *A Loving Justice: The Moral and Legal Responsibilities of the US Catholic Church Under the Americans with Disabilities Act*. Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities, 1995. 202-529-2933

Lalonde Benton, Janice and Mary Jane Owen. *Opening Doors To People With Disabilities Volume II: The Resource File*. Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities, 1997. 202-529-2933

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework for Access and Inclusion*. Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, 1999. 800-235-8722, catalog reference no. 5-311

---

## Sacraments

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Adam: God's Beloved*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Can You Drink the Cup?* Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1996.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Road To Daybreak, A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Doubleday, 1988.

## Videos

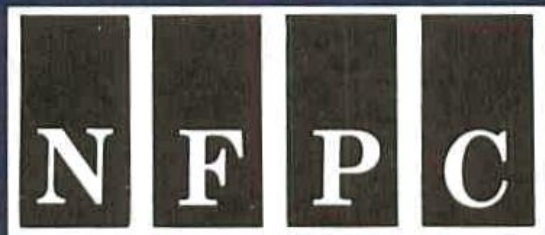
Bernardin, Cardinal Joseph and Fr. Henri Nouwen. *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*. Chicago: Pathways Awareness Foundation. 20 minutes. 800-955-2445. \$10.

Bishop, Marilyn. *Disability Etiquette*. Dayton, OH: Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, University of Dayton. 30 minutes. 888-532-3389. \$30.

Macken, Fr. Patrick. *The Inclusive Catholic Community*. Dayton, OH: Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, University of Dayton. 45 minutes. 888-532-3389. \$30.

Owen, Mary Jane. *Disability Ministry: Video Vignettes by Mary Jane Owen*. Dayton, OH: University of Dayton. 29 minutes. 888-532-3389. \$10.





**NATIONAL FEDERATION OF PRIESTS' COUNCILS**

1337 West Ohio Street, Chicago, IL 60622

e mail <nfpc@nfpc.org>