

The Gift of Peace, Christians with Impairments, and the Church

MARC TUMEINSKI 
Anna Maria College

One of the demands facing the church is the call for unity with Christians with profound intellectual and physical impairments. As the church becomes a community of justice with and for people with impairments, she is an instrument of God's shalom. However, too many of our sisters and brothers with impairments find themselves on the outside looking in. How can the church continue to move toward a more complete welcome and participation? Responding to this theological question precedes clinical or legal concerns. The best the world has to offer is not what the church needs, though she can learn from reasonable professional approaches. The message and peace of Christ can undo the walls of separation that keep Christians with impairments out. Such a transformation would be a sign that the church is being built up in peace, and would offer a model of true communion among a diversity of people.

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Parishes are the home of the Christian community; they are the heart of our Church. Parishes are the place where God's people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church's life.¹

The Church recognizes that every parish community includes members with disabilities, and earnestly desires their active participation ... Catholic adults and children with disabilities, and their families, earnestly desire full and meaningful participation in the sacramental life of the Church.²

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish*, 1993 edition, Introduction, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/communities-salt-and-light-reflections-social-mission-parish>.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, Revised Edition*, 2017 edition, 1, <https://www.usccb.org/about/divine-worship/policies/upload/Guidelines-for-the-Celebration-of-the-Sacraments-with-Persons-with-Disabilities-Revised-Edition.pdf>.

Marc Tumeinski is Assistant Professor and Director of the Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministry at Anna Maria College (Paxton, Massachusetts). His publications have appeared in The Heythrop Journal, Journal of Catholic Social Thought, Teaching Theology and Religion, and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly.

An Invitation to Ever New Forms of Fraternity³

THE opening quotations introduce the central premise of this paper. The church can and should be better at recognizing and welcoming people with impairments as sisters and brothers. Christ's gift of peace makes possible, desirable, and necessary a deep family unity among Catholics with and without impairments, to be lived out in the church and particularly in the local parish.⁴ This covenantal unity becomes a sign and instrument of peace visible and active within the church as well as a witness and seed of *shalom* for the world. Embracing the peace of Christ intensifies the baptismal solidarity that exists among Christian disciples with and without impairments. The church and parishes are to grow into living out more fully this gift of peace with children and adults with impairments and their families. We all benefit. Conversely, to the degree that disciples with impairments are excluded or marginalized from the life of the church, the parish, and disciples—both those with and without obvious impairments—are deprived of the fullness of peace available in this world. We all lose out.

Our parishes will be immersed more deeply into *shalom* and testify more clearly to God's gift of peace when we pray, worship, dialogue, serve, and celebrate together with people of all ages and capacities. By recognizing the peace shared with each and every disciple, regardless of bodily or intellectual capability, we take up the challenge of life together as church and parish. The communal liturgical practice of the Rite of Peace, accepting and exchanging the beautiful gift of *shalom* from Christ, will be enriched as disciples with and without impairments join together more fully in all aspects of the life of the parish, and exercise full and meaningful participation.

Reflection on the identity of the church and of the parish as sharers in peace points to a specific imperative to seek out, recognize, and welcome people with significant impairments, in imitation of the Lord who so often sought out those on the edges of society, both offering and accepting hospitality. Our parishes are called to be places of mutual welcome.

³ See John Paul II, "Homily at the Jubilee of the Disabled" (December 3, 2000), §5. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20001203_jubildisabled.pdf.

⁴ Little stresses the importance of active participation in parish communities. Brent Little, "A Charity of Mutuality and Hospitality: L'Arche's Witness to Catholic Theology," *Horizons* 47, no. 1 (2020): 46–68, at 49.

The church in her wisdom emphasizes the personal and relational aspects of the human being, of discipleship, and of the parish.⁵ This emphasis draws our attention to the peace bestowed by Christ that is to shape our relationships and provides a context for a powerful claim made by John Paul II:

In this world of ours ... the difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problems as burdens to be removed or resolved as quickly as possible. Disabled people are, instead, living icons of the crucified Son. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance.⁶

Active participation in the life of the church by Christians with impairments invites every disciple to contemplate the face of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, in new and fruitful ways. We can learn to recognize our own limitations, with a humility and poverty of spirit. Cultivating a spirit of contemplation and a virtue of meekness enriches our capacity as a church for peacemaking.

As church and as disciples, we have received a beautiful gift of peace from God that abundantly runs over⁷ and that cannot be contained by any merely worldly method or attempt to “resolve the burden of impairment.” A dual challenge for the contemporary church and local parishes is first to approach the broad reality of human impairment from a theological, ecclesial, and

⁵ We may consider the nature of the parish as “the heart of our Church ... the place where God’s people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church’s life” (*Communities of Salt and Light*), and furthermore as a communality that recognizes the realities of human vulnerability and impairment.

⁶ John Paul II, “Message of John Paul II on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,” (January 5, 2004), http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_s-pe_20040108_handicap-mentale.pdf. This message runs the risk of overspiritualizing impairment, and of treating people with impairments as “angels” rather than as human beings who are good, fallen, and redeemed. Treating those with impairments, even unintentionally, as more like angels or innocent spiritual beings is to reduce their humanity and to potentially hamper their growth in faith and discipleship (e.g., if we think that a person with an intellectual limitation is more like “a little angel,” we may not even understand that they may desire adult romantic relationships or be capable of excelling at a job, or believe that such a person should receive the sacrament of reconciliation or participate in catechesis and faith formation, and so on). See also Deborah Creamer, “Theological Accessibility: The Contribution of Disability,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2006).

⁷ Luke 6:38: “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

sacramental perspective,⁸ and second to avoid (unintentionally) prioritizing “worldly” approaches to impairment.⁹ At the very least, Catholic service to and relationships with vulnerable people ought to be discernibly distinct from secular service efforts.¹⁰ This in and of itself is a revolutionary claim, bringing us closer to the distinctive nature of peacemaking described in the Beatitudes, rooted not in the world but in the Word.

In response to these dual challenges, we can draw upon theologically informed considerations around the nature of the parish, the divine gift of the peace we are called to share, and the beauty of the parish, which becomes a welcoming home for all people, including those with significant

⁸ One of the risks in writing (theologically) about people with impairments is to inadvertently create a unidirectional focus on what “we can do to help them.” All of us receive help from God. While offering and receiving help is part of the Christian life, it is not one way only. Charity and justice are relational. See Pia Matthews, “Being Disabled and Disability Theology: Insights from and for Catholic Social Teaching,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 16, no. 2 (2019): 295–317, at 301–02; William Gaventa, *Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), xvii–xviii.

⁹ Such worldly approaches include those that are rooted primarily in medicine, psychology, sociology, or the law, as helpful as these tools may be under the right circumstances. The conceptual framework and accompanying language surrounding the reality of human limitation broadly understood is complex and has a long and evolving history. For the sake of simplicity, the term “impairment” will be used throughout to refer to problems in the functioning of body or mind (as described for example by the World Health Organization). Distinctions between the terms “impairment” and “disability,” and preferences for one term over the other or for another term entirely, are important, though they raise complicated arguments that would expand this paper unnecessarily and perhaps overshadow the focus of this inquiry. The usage and definitions of these terms (impairment, disability) also varies within distinct fields, such as medicine, law, human resources, and so on. The limited focus of this article also means setting aside important considerations such as societal patterns and barriers related to impairment, how and when an impairment was manifested, links between impairment and vulnerability, and so on.

¹⁰ In *On the Service of Charity* (November 11, 2012), Pope Benedict noted that “the Church’s charitable activity at all levels must avoid the risk of becoming just another form of organized social assistance.” See Marc Tumeinski, “Hurting or Helping: A Catholic Ethical Analysis of the Practice of Physical and Mechanical Restraints by Human Services,” *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 435–48. Miguel Romero rightly points out that “a theological problem arises when Christian theologians *uncritically presume or attribute comprehensiveness* to the social model’s way of framing and guiding theoretical discourse on disability.” See Miguel Romero, “The Goodness and Beauty of Our Fragile Flesh: Moral Theologians and our Engagement with ‘Disability,’” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (September 2017): 206–53, at 224.

impairments and their families.¹¹ Pope Francis offers a compelling reflection on such considerations:

The Church cannot be voiceless or out of tune in the defence and promotion of people with disabilities. Her closeness to the families helps them to overcome the loneliness that often risks closing them off for want of attention and support. This applies even more so due to her responsibility with regard to generating and forming the Christian life. The community must not lack the words and above all the gestures for encountering and welcoming people with disabilities. The Sunday Liturgy, especially, must be able to include them, so that the encounter with the Risen Lord and with the community itself may be a source of hope and courage in the difficult journey of life.¹²

The Holy Father draws our attention to formation, encounter, and catechesis in Christian discipleship, as incarnated in the liturgy and in the life of the parish. For such encounters to flourish, Francis points out that we must look for beauty in the other person: “No physical or mental limitation should ever be an impediment to this encounter, because Christ’s face shines in the heart of each person.”¹³

Lest we mistakenly conclude that the reality of impairment is a narrow concern, we may consider that most if not all people are liable at any time to experience some degree of impairment, whether from birth or related to age, sickness, or accident. Many too are in relationships with people who have some kind of impairment. This is a present reality in our parishes, if we but look.

To build up the Body of Christ in peace, we cannot allow physical, emotional, intellectual, or societal barriers to blind us to the face of Christ in our companions on the Way who are impaired in body or mind. With divine grace, our limitations of understanding and of love can be overcome, as individuals and as parishes. We can create new ways of living together as

¹¹ One risk is that parishes will fall into the presumption that active participation of people with impairments is dependent upon specialized knowledge, supports, techniques, and so on. On the topic of scarcity, see Amy Jacober, “Hesed: How Youth Ministry with Teens with Disabilities Helps Restore an Abundant Community” (paper presented at the Association of Youth Ministry Educators Conference, Dallas, TX, October 28–30, 2017), <https://www.aymeducators.org/wp-content/uploads/Amy-Jacobser-Hesed-YMin-for-AYME-2017-with-watermark.pdf>.

¹² “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Conference Organized by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization,” October 21, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171021_convegno-ppcne.pdf.

¹³ Francis, “Address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization,” 2017.

Catholics that will better allow the divine image and likeness of each disciple to shine forth, by trusting in God's grace, learning from the witness of disciples with impairments as well as their families, following the example of effective catechists and using the tools of reason to create new and effective approaches.¹⁴

Many avenues for parishes to become more welcoming homes for people with impairments and their families lie before us as a church: listening to the voices and stories of those with impairments and their families; actively seeking out individuals and families who feel left out, misunderstood, or forgotten; facilitating active liturgical participation of all parishioners regardless of ability; providing a strong voice in defense of the lives of those who are highly vulnerable in relation to impairment; developing catechetical approaches that welcome and form people of varying abilities; and seeing and embracing the potential for ministry by people with impairments.¹⁵ These and other approaches may be profitably understood as means of building up the peace of the parish, contributing to peace in the world.

Person and Community, Disciple and Church

An essential foundation for a theological contemplation of the nature of impairment must be a Christian anthropology, and the anthropological

¹⁴ "Moreover, let us take care, especially we ministers of Christ's grace, not to fall prey to the neo-Pelagian mistake of failing to recognize the need for the strength of grace that comes from the Sacraments of Christian initiation. Let us learn to overcome the discomfort and fear that at times we can feel toward persons with disabilities. Let us learn to seek and also to intelligently "invent" appropriate tools so that no one lacks the support of grace. Let us form—first of all by example!—catechists ever more able to accompany these persons so they may grow in faith and give their genuine and original contribution to the life of the Church. Lastly, I hope that in the community, more and more, people with disabilities may be their own catechists, by their witness too, so as to pass on the faith in a more effective way." Francis, "Address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization," 2017.

¹⁵ This topic raises questions of resource allocation. To what extent can a single parish be responsible for responding to the many and varied needs of parishioners with impairments? Is this not the legitimate function of societal resources? And so on. These are complex discussions worth having, though the focus of this article is on the theological and moral implications of parishes seeking to live up to their nature and identity. For a helpful reflection on this question from the specific perspective of the responsibility to care for one's elders, see Charles Zola, "Prudential Elder Care: A Thomistic Approach," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 139–41. While recognizing the significance of pastoral as well as prudential implications, these are not the primary focus of this article.

question necessarily leads to an inquiry into community.¹⁶ These are questions that exceed the intended scope of this article, but we can at least mention their relevance to the topic.

The helpful work of theologians such as Miguel Romero,¹⁷ Thomas Reynolds,¹⁸ Amy Jacober,¹⁹ and Talitha Cooreman-Guittin²⁰ examine anthropological approaches aimed at a theological understanding of vulnerability and impairment.²¹ We are created as unique individuals, and we are also social beings. The parish is a community that should recognize in her members the present realities of human vulnerability and impairment.²² Only then can we truly take up the peace offered by Jesus that is not found in false notions of power or independence.

As noted previously, many if not most people in a parish know someone with some type of impairment. All parishioners are likely at some point to

¹⁶ “The starting point for every reflection on disability is rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology: even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature.” John Paul II, “Message on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,” 2004.

¹⁷ Romero, “The Goodness and Beauty of Our Fragile Flesh,” 250. On the same page, Romero further notes that “Integral creaturely goodness and proportionate harmony is not in conflict with the various ways the human body is vulnerable to defect and infirmity. Rather, it is through the innate vulnerabilities and coordinate dependencies of the human body that the specific goodness and beauty of the human body is manifest.”

¹⁸ See Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), chap. 3.

¹⁹ Jacober, “Hesed.”

²⁰ Talitha Cooreman-Guittin, “Growing in Humanity: On Vulnerability, Capacitation, and Encounter in Religious Education: A Christian Practical Theological Approach,” *Religious Education* 114, no. 2 (2019): 143–54.

²¹ Wolfensberger describes the concept of heightened vulnerability, meaning that people with impairments are more vulnerable to adverse (social and societal) circumstances, which are then more likely to cause hurt, and furthermore for that hurt to cause more extensive harm to the person. Wolf Wolfensberger, *A Brief Introduction to Social Role Valorization: A High-Order Concept for Addressing the Plight of Societally Devalued People, and for Structuring Human Services*, 3rd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency, 1998), 124–25. See Timothy Kearney, “The Transforming Power of Vulnerability,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (August 2013): 244–54; and Diana Ventura, “The Unheard Voices of People with Disabilities: Practical Theology in Conversation with the Spiritualities of Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2014), <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/16325>.

²² Brent Little writes about L’Arche as “a community built on shared vulnerability and impoverishment.” See Little, “A Charity of Mutuality and Hospitality,” 59.

experience a level of impairment, whether related to age, sickness, accident, or a lifelong condition. One important step for parishes, and ordained and lay ministers, is to commit to seeking out those parishioners who have various kinds of impairments.

The human being is a social animal; in Jason Greig's words, "creatures made for networks of life-giving mutuality and friendship."²³ We need family to grow and mature but also to develop relationships outside of family.²⁴ Disciples do best in human-sized and human-shaped community.²⁵ Theological writings on small Christian community or on basic ecclesial community generally reinforce the idea that human nature is suited to growing up in, being formed and nurtured by, and contributing to, a community that can be seen, touched, and heard. From a pastoral perspective, the aforementioned theological points indicate that disciples are more easily formed into the Body of Christ when part of some type of close Christian communality, and hence my focus on the parish.²⁶

At the same time, contemporary parish life, though necessary, is likely not sufficient for such deep formation of life in community, at least as it exists in some places in the world today.²⁷ As noted in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, we are created social beings, but this does not automatically lead to communion or the gift of self to another.²⁸ It is the rare parish that is forming disciples to practice welcome and hospitality in

²³ See Jason Reimer Greig, "Shalom Made Strange: A Peace Church Theology for and with People with Intellectual Disabilities," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014).

²⁴ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §§ 212–213, notes that family is essential both to the individual and to society; 2004 edition, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

²⁵ James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 17, 124–29.

²⁶ See Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (The Holy See, 1997), §§69, 70, 84, 86, 87, 89, 91, 106, 143, 158, 159; 1997 edition, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 67.

²⁷ See, for example, report 3 ("Participation in Catholic Parish Life: Religious Rites and Parish Activities in the 1980s"), report 10 ("The Parish as Community"), and report 15 ("Post Vatican II Parish Life in the United States: Review and Preview") of the *Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life*, Church Life Research Initiative, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN.

²⁸ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §150.

general, as well as specifically in regard to people with impairments.²⁹ As noted in a 2016 study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “While parishes in the United States have made large strides to include people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities, there is also a lot of work to be done.”³⁰ Furthermore, the practice of hospitality and welcome goes far beyond mere acknowledgment of rights. “We recognize that the bare assertion and protection of rights can become a sterile exercise whenever it lacks the Christian presumption of our common call to friendship with one another in Christ.”³¹

Parishes may provide an inkling of Christian community, which by gospel standards would include people of varying abilities and ages, but they are not always providing the stable community that disciples need to mature in the Christian life.³² The more that we are part of strong and nurturing parishes, the more we will be able to welcome, develop, and embrace Christian friendships with people with impairments—not as recipients of pity but as friends and companions in Christ. Pope Francis stressed the importance of belonging: “A person with disabilities ... needs not only to exist but also to belong to a community.”³³

This point underscores a core reality: “The Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with these marginal people, including those who suffer from physical and psychological disabilities.”³⁴ The US bishops

²⁹ This point is illustrated by the account related in the article by Kevin Jones, “‘Heart of Hospitality’ Best Way for Catholic Parishes to Serve the Disabled,” *Catholic News Agency*, March 5, 2020.

³⁰ Jonathon Holland, Patrick Gilger, SJ, and Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ, “Disabilities in Parishes Across the United States: How Parishes in the United States Accommodate and Serve People with Disabilities” (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University, Summer 2016).

³¹ “Affirmation of Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities. A Resolution Issued by the Board of Directors of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) on the 40th Anniversary of the Pastoral Statement” (no date), https://ncpd.org/files/resources-toolkits/Affirmation_of_and_Commitment_to_the_Call_of_the_1978_Pastoral_Statement_of_U.S._Catholic_Bishops_on_Persons_with_Disabilities_.pdf.

³² Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, §§ 253, 254, 257.

³³ Message of the Holy Father Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (December 3, 2019), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20191203_messaggio-disabilita.pdf.

³⁴ *Pastoral Statement of the US Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities* (US Catholic Conference, 1978), 12, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Pastoral-Statement-of-U-S-Catholic-Bishops-on-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf>. I am not comfortable necessarily with the language of suffering in this particular context, but the point stands. See also Dawn DeVries, “Creation,

are making a significant claim, namely, that the church is more truly the assembly of Christians when she is a home and a place of peace for those who are lowly in the eyes of the world. Although this is by no means an empty claim, it is not entirely obvious always and in every place that the church is actually living up to this identity.³⁵

Dorothy Coughlin knows exactly what it looks like when people with disabilities are left out of the church. She grew up in a large Catholic family with a younger sister who was born with a profound developmental disability. “We had eight kids in our family and all of us would go to church—seven of us could go, but not my sister. When we went to Catholic school, we all could go except my sister,” she says. “The church didn’t hear disability, it didn’t see disability. That reality was pretty much missing in my experience of the church.”³⁶

Rebecca Susag, a parishioner of St. Joseph Parish in Hastings, Minnesota, has felt her share of rejection through the years on behalf of her 32-year-old daughter, Marta, who has autism. “We really quit going to church for a while,” Susag says. “We’ve had nasty comments over the years, but we continue to stay involved. We had great difficulty getting her to receive her first communion, because she wasn’t involved in any of the sacramental programs and there was no Catholic education for her. Marta was left by the wayside.”³⁷

Academic Wolf Wolfensberger describes the “normative lack of Christian communality in local congregations as the central obstacle to a proper relationship with needy members.”³⁸ He posited that parishes with a thin experience of communion and community will not be in a strong enough place to welcome those disciples who may in fundamental ways require more of the parish.

If this is true, how can the church continue to move toward its true identity, toward a more complete welcome, membership, and participation for, with, and by children, adults, and elders with impairments? The Fathers of

Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, edited by Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994): 124–140, at 124–125.

³⁵ Brief anecdotes are shared occasionally in this article to “put flesh on” and to personalize some of the points.

³⁶ Katie Bahr, “Real Presence: What Catholics with Developmental Disabilities Bring to the Table: Catholic Churches Strive to Welcome those with Developmental Disabilities through Special Ministries and a Change in Attitude” *US Catholic* 78, no. 12 (December 2013): 12–17.

³⁷ Bahr, “Real Presence.”

³⁸ *The Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger*, eds. William Gaventa and David Coulter (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), 111–26, at 116.

the Second Vatican Council confirm that the church “is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race ... The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church so that all ... might also attain fuller unity in Christ.”³⁹ Note the council’s emphasis on unity as well as a recognition of the world as it is, which in light of our topic includes the twin realities of impairment and vulnerability.⁴⁰ What might this mean specifically for parishes, and for Christians with and without impairments? This article focuses on the following: welcoming and sharing the divine gift of peace, acting in loving service to fellow parishioners, living as exiles who are in the world but not of it, and cultivating an appreciation for true beauty.

The unity of the church is inherently mutual. Discussions of the church and disciples with various kinds of impairments can too easily slip into a one-way relationship (“What can we do for them?”) as opposed to reflecting on the broader and deeper question of how we together are gifted and called to be a church at peace. Each of us receives help from God; this is primary—all are dependent on God, not just those who are impaired in some way. The church together has received the gift of peace from Christ Jesus, not just those judged to be more competent or who do not seem vulnerable. These truths have profound implications for ecclesial identity, mission, and ministry as well as for relationships among disciples.

In the words of St. Augustine, peace speaks to “the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God. The peace of all things is the tranquility of order.”⁴¹ The understanding of peace as a divine order instituted by God and shared with the church is central to this study.⁴² The fullness of peace is relational and directs our hearts toward redeemed relationships with God and with one another. Cardinal Joseph

³⁹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), November 21, 1964, §1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_1964_1121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

⁴⁰ This point is not in any way meant to overstate vulnerability nor to imply inherent weakness or some kind of failing in people who have impairments. All of us, because we are creatures not the Creator, and because of the consequences of the Fall, are vulnerable. Rather, this point is meant to recognize the particular vulnerabilities that often accompany the reality of impairment, and perhaps to a significant degree.

⁴¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book XIX, chapter 13, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.XIX.13.html>. See also John XXIII, Encyclical *Pacem in terris* (April 11, 1963), §167. “Peace ... is an order that is founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity, and brought into effect under the auspices of freedom.” See http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.pdf.

⁴² See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q29, A1 and A2; Q183, A2.

Ratzinger stated that the “redeemed people will be people of peace,”⁴³ pointing out that Christian community involves mutual trust, participation, and dependence. Faith in God calls for communion with others: a relationship with God brings forth relationship with others.⁴⁴ How can parishes better embody trust, participation, and dependence in relation to Christians who have impairments?⁴⁵

According to Greig, “The church’s *telos* is *shalom*”⁴⁶—in other words, her end or purpose is the fulness of peace. *Shalom* indicates a completeness or perfection.⁴⁷ The Scriptures are replete with descriptions of peace specifically in connection with the church, which is relevant to our focus on the parish. The nature of the church is peace, as we are reminded at every Mass through many liturgical prayers and actions, and the Rite of Peace itself. Throughout the Mass, the Good News of peace is revealed and incarnated. With the help of grace, the gift of peace moves from the eucharistic table out to the whole congregation. The words of Metropolitan John Zizioulas are particularly instructive: “This attitude which transcended not only *social* but also *natural* divisions (such as age, race, etc.) was portrayed in the eucharistic community *par excellence*.”⁴⁸ An understanding of the church, and by extension the parish, as a recipient of peace brings into sharper focus certain implications for welcoming people with and without significant impairments.

⁴³ Joseph Ratzinger, *What It Means to Be a Christian*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 23.

⁴⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 101–02.

⁴⁵ A focus on the shared gift of peace is certainly not the only valid approach to the challenge laid out by the US bishops, of finding our true identity as a church in relation to people with various impairments. Multiple writers have explicitly and implicitly examined various communal approaches to the same question. For example, in relation to Christians with impairments, Reynolds emphasizes the communal nature of the church as: home, a dwelling together with others in God’s creation; the household of God called into relationship; and the body of Christ. See Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, chapters 2 and 7. According to theologian and friend of L’Arche Tom Murphy: “One could say that the highly relational anthropology of L’Arche can only be accessed via the gateway of encounter.” See Tom Murphy, “Learning Compassion through Practices of Encounter in L’Arche” (conference paper, REA Annual Meeting, November 3–5, 2017). I would add that such encounters speak to the *shalom* nature of the church.

⁴⁶ Greig, “Shalom Made Strange.”

⁴⁷ John L. McKenzie, SJ, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), s.v. “peace.” See also Steven Schwarzschild, “Shalom,” in *The Challenges of Shalom: The Jewish Tradition of Peace and Justice*, eds. Murray Polner and Naomi Goodman (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1994), 17.

⁴⁸ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1985 [2004 printing]), 151.

Commenting upon the international L'Arche movement, Greig connects weakness and vulnerability with peace: "L'Arche bears out the Pauline insight that weakness, not power or strength, represents the means of God's shalom. Humility toward others, not superiority, marks the way of peace."⁴⁹ Although we should be cautious about holding up L'Arche or any example as a perfect model, the vision and often the general practice of L'Arche (apart from its founder or any single community member) can provide much needed wisdom for today, including for individual Christians, families, parishes, and the church as a whole. Zizioulas and Greig help us to consider that the peace of the church is richer, deeper, and closer to fullness when it is received and experienced more completely by a diversity of people; in this case, including people with significant impairments and their family.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Greig, "Shalom Made Strange." Jean Vanier was the founder of L'Arche and remained with that community until his death in May 2019. In June 2019, the international L'Arche association announced an external inquiry to investigate history of abuse within L'Arche. This investigation looked for evidence of sexual impropriety carried out by Vanier as well as any knowledge Vanier may have had about sexual abuse carried out by his spiritual advisor, Fr. Thomas Philippe, who died in 1993. In February 2020, L'Arche reported that these investigations indicated that Fr. Philippe had sexually abused multiple adult women without any impairments; that Vanier was aware of this; and that Vanier had initiated sexual behavior with multiple adult women, without any impairments, under the guise of spiritual accompaniment. This report bears remembering in any examination of Vanier's life and work. The international L'Arche movement has publicly committed to an ongoing review and examination of its history and its policies. Statements from L'Arche have connected these review efforts to key principles from its guiding documents, such as an emphasis on recognizing the unique dignity of each and every person, and on the importance of mutual relationship and dependence.

This article is based on my paper given at the CTS convention held in May–June 2019, prior to Vanier's death and the subsequent investigations. Although we certainly cannot and should not discount the role that Vanier held within L'Arche from its founding until his death, the principles of L'Arche stand on their own, and can be examined in their own right. See the author's note in Brent Little, "A Charity of Mutuality and Hospitality," 46–68. More relevant to the topic of this article, however, we should also recognize that the outcomes of the aforementioned investigations highlight the fragility of peace, and the necessity for diligence, principles, and safeguards. Although the reports do not indicate any abuse by Vanier of adults with impairments, vulnerability to abuse is a reality for far too many children and adults with significant impairments. Parishes should be mindful of such vulnerability and act accordingly to protect people and preserve true peace.

⁵⁰ For the purposes of this paper, this understanding of peace includes those with various vulnerabilities and impairments, though this by no means exhausts the reality of peace given by Christ to the church. Note also that this emphasis on peace can broaden the concept of diversity as typically understood or at least as typically practiced in many

Church as Sign and Instrument of *Shalom*

In what ways might a theological appreciation of peace as a divine gift of order, joy, tranquility, and harmony enrich an examination of impairment, contingency, and vulnerability, particularly as represented in and by parish life? In his study of disability and spirituality, William Gaventa writes thoughtfully of the importance of recovering a sense of wholeness.⁵¹ This echoes the biblical concern with *shalom* and *eirene*. Kevin Ahern identifies a Thomistic emphasis on our ontological vulnerability and the ways that the virtues of magnanimity and humility can build up order and justice.⁵²

We can turn also to a theological understanding of the state of grace in which Adam and Eve shared in divine life, lived in friendship with God, and reflected the “inner harmony of the human person, the harmony between man and woman, and ... the harmony between the first couple and all creation.”⁵³ This state of original justice represented a beautiful pattern—a fourfold *shalom* with God, self, others, and creation—and can function as a signpost in a parish community acting together to embrace peace in the midst of human vulnerability and limitation. The harmony of these four relationships was lost through the sin of our first parents. Our faith tells us that Christ is restoring *shalom* and rebuilding these four broken relationships, and furthermore that the church is called to join and continue this mission as sisters and brothers.

John XXIII sketched out a basic structure, teaching that order (peace) between human beings is founded on love, truth, justice, and freedom. Peace is a fruit of charity and rests on a recognition of the truth of God’s transcendence and of each person’s inherent dignity, whatever particular impairments or vulnerabilities exist. Peace builds on justice, the freely chosen promotion of the common good for all, not just for those with particular skills, competencies, or attributes.⁵⁴

Christ gives to the church—that community of disciples who recognize that they are good, fallen, and redeemed—a gift of order, rest, and peace.⁵⁵

(secular) contexts. Rather than limiting diversity to race or ethnicity, for example, the vision of peace noted in the gospels draws all people together.

⁵¹ Gaventa, *Disability and Spirituality*, xix, 283, 284.

⁵² Kevin Ahern, “Virtue, Vulnerability, and Social Transformation,” *College Theology Society Annual Volume* 57 (2011): 117–29, at 121–22.

⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §376, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

⁵⁴ John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, §§ 35, 37, 45.

⁵⁵ The vocabulary of peace in the Scriptures is a rich one, including *shalom*, *nuwach*, *taxis*, and *eirene*, to name several relevant biblical concepts (*shalom* Strong’s H7965; *taxis* noun Strong’s G5010; *eirēnē* noun Strong’s G1515; *nuwach* verb Strong’s H5117).

The church at peace is not a uniform sameness but rather *shalom* in the midst of and incorporating a multiplicity of distinct individuals, including those with impairments. We can truly be ourselves, who God created us to be, because we are part of a larger Christian kinship. The sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist make this possible. Pope Francis has so often reminded us that we are sisters and brothers, and what this reality implies: “Fraternity is what allows the equal to be different people.”⁵⁶ Zizioulas similarly points out that the eucharistic community transcends divisions without erasing unique identity.⁵⁷

Christ inaugurated a fellowship of order and peace, where each and all can find a home, with all our gifts, differences, brokenness, vulnerabilities, and wounds. This peace is a gift, not a human achievement, though we are invited to receive and use God’s gift of peace. A key emphasis is on invitation: each person must decide whether to accept this peace from Christ. Order and peace are simultaneously gift and responsibility. As we willingly enter into the peace of Christ, we are shaped by the divine gift of peace and we also mold its particular expressions in the world. This shaping and molding should incorporate those persons with various physical and intellectual impairments, and their families, as well as those Christians who are marginalized for a host of reasons.⁵⁸ This speaks to the purpose of ordained and lay ministry in a parish, as well as to the broader nature of a parish community.

This is a good point at which to remind ourselves that most of us will experience some level of impairment if we live long enough, and furthermore, that most of us know someone who has some type of impairment. As we contemplate the fellowship that Jesus created, we recognize that authentic Christian relationships with the “other” can help to build up *shalom*, a *shalom* that

⁵⁶ Message from Francis to the participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (April 28–May 2, 2017), <https://press.vatican.va/content/sal-astampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/04/28/170428h.html>. See also the *Catechism*, §814: “From the beginning, this one Church has been marked by a great diversity which comes from both the variety of God’s gifts and the diversity of those who receive them. Within the unity of the People of God, a multiplicity of peoples and cultures is gathered together. Among the Church’s members, there are different gifts, offices, conditions, and ways of life ... The great richness of such diversity is not opposed to the Church’s unity.”

⁵⁷ “The way the catholicity of the Church is revealed in the eucharistic community shows that the ultimate essence of catholicity lies in the transcendence of all divisions in Christ. This should be understood absolutely and without any reservations. It covers all areas and all dimensions of existence whether human or cosmic, historical or eschatological, spiritual or material, social or individual, etc.” Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 162.

⁵⁸ Wolfensberger analyzes a range of social processes that can create a cycle of marginalization. See Wolfensberger, *A Brief Introduction to Social Role Valorization*, 3–24.

benefits each and all.⁵⁹ In finding that covenant home and freely entering into it, each disciple builds up the peace and order of the church in new and beautiful ways, more closely reflecting the eschatological peace of the church in heaven.

Christians who are vulnerable or impaired are called to be peacemakers, as are all disciples. Each baptized disciple can build up the church, regardless of whether others are ready or willing to see such contributions. How often in the Bible does God choose the lowly and weak to be His instruments of profound change? As quoted in the introduction, John Paul II recognized this truth about people with impairments: “They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance.”⁶⁰

The church on earth more faithfully reflects order and *shalom* when she more fully embraces the multiplicity as well as the vulnerability of God’s daughters and sons. Greig compellingly describes this as a *shalom* made strange, a peace that appears strange to the world and yet “offers a bold counter-narrative to a culture that disdains those with intellectual disabilities”⁶¹—and we could add physical and emotional as well. The very disciples too often overlooked in our parishes, perhaps because we wrongly judge by worldly standards, may be the ones who are contributing most profoundly to *shalom*, even when that is not recognized.

The *shalom* of a parish is a deeper, richer, and more complex reality than secular ideals of integration or of civil laws concerning accessibility to public buildings. These ideals and laws are mere glimpses of order and peace, and as such they possess an element of goodness, but they are certainly not the holistic vision of peace that the church has been vouchsafed. Parishes cannot rest satisfied if these standards are met. Such laws and ideals may provide useful points of dialogue between the church and world, but they are by no means the solid food of the gospel, and we as Christians should not limit our imagination or discourse to worldly frameworks.

Even with the gospel call and God’s gifts of grace, too many of our sisters and brothers with significant physical and intellectual impairments, as well as various mental disorders, find themselves “outside the gates.”⁶² The same is often true for their families. Historical, physical, attitudinal, educational,

⁵⁹ Cooreman-Guittin, “Growing in Humanity,” 143–54.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, “Message on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,” 2004.

⁶¹ Greig, “Shalom Made Strange.”

⁶² Creamer, “Theological Accessibility.”

experiential, and societal walls still exist within Catholic parishes, schools, and dioceses.⁶³ David Perry wisely cautions of “a long history of disability serving only as an opportunity for non-disabled people to demonstrate their piety through service, a ‘charity model’ of disability that’s kind, but ultimately still promotes otherness and exclusion. Religious leaders are especially prone to endorsing this charity model.”⁶⁴ We should not settle for this status quo in our parishes, clergy, and parish ministries, nor in our lives of discipleship.

Jesus provides the example, impetus, and sacramental graces necessary to take up this challenge: to begin to undo the walls of separation and segregation that keep Christians with impairments out or on the margins, or at the very least to shake these walls, lower their height, and diminish their depth so that we begin to glimpse and then embrace one another as sister and brother.

The church, and every parish, is called to incarnate both time and place for shared peace, particularly in the face of human vulnerability. This leads next to brief theological considerations of three relevant ideas: *hypotassō*, *diaspōra*, and the transfiguring power of beauty.

***Hypotassō*: Be Subject to One Another out of Reverence for Christ**

As noted previously, “The Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with ... those who suffer from physical and psychological disabilities.”⁶⁵ This does not primarily require clinical expertise, training, or outside involvement, but rather first and foremost entails disciples within the context of a parish who strive to live out the gospel in relation to the realities of human impairment and vulnerability. We do not come as those who see ourselves as strong or competent or the experts or helpers, but as those dependent on and subject to the same Lord and incorporated into the same church. “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).⁶⁶ A repeated emphasis in the letters of Paul and of Peter on building

⁶³ See Mary Jo Iozzio, “Thinking about Disabilities with Justice, Liberation, and Mercy,” *Horizons* 36, no. 1 (2009): 32–49, at 44–45; Carlson, “Making the Invisible Visible,” 46–73; Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Disabilities in Parishes Across the United States: How Parishes in the United States Accommodate and Serve People with Disabilities” (special report, summer 2016): 7.

⁶⁴ David M. Perry, “Pope Francis Needs to Do More than Kiss the Disabled,” *Crux* (June 14, 2016). <https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2016/06/pope-francis-needs-kiss-disabled/>.

⁶⁵ *Pastoral Statement of the US Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities*, 1978, § 12.

⁶⁶ In Greek: *hypotassō allēlōn en phobos Christos*. This verse includes the Greek verb *hypotassō*, which occurs more than forty times in the New Testament (in Luke, Romans, 1

up the church, and on mutual and humble service to one another, provides a solid foundation for responding to the challenges of integration laid out by the US bishops. Although the emphasis in the New Testament letters is not specifically about those impaired in mind or body, their lessons can provide a needed focus for parishes striving to be home for all disciples, regardless of capacity or age.

Fuller integration with and fuller participation by disciples with impairments will bring the parish closer to actualizing the gift of *eirene* given by Christ Jesus and will build up order in the church.⁶⁷ “Strive to excel in building up the church ... For God is not a God of confusion but of peace ... All things should be done ... in order” (1 Cor 14:12, 33, 40). Paul is clear on this imperative: be subject (*hupotassō*) to one another out of reverence for Christ.

To freely and obediently place oneself in loving order under God’s headship (Eph 1:22), and therefore in loving service to one another, is to build up *shalom*. This is *hupotassō*.⁶⁸ We are baptized as servants not as rulers. Jesus is Lord and we freely say yes to be immersed into the order and peace of the church inaugurated by Christ. Our standards are not set by the world. Accordingly, the US bishops point out that the church, dioceses, and parishes are to more diligently and with greater love welcome Christians with impairments. We are to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. As we follow Christ and willingly place ourselves (*hupotassō*) under His lordship and order, we are enabled to truly serve our sisters and brothers—with and without impairments—and to be served by them.⁶⁹

Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Titus, Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter). Many of these occurrences relate to communal relationships. Unfortunately, *hupotassō* has been interpreted as submission to the point of victimhood. This does not reflect the character of its usage in the New Testament, nor a proper understanding of discipleship, baptism, and the nature of the church. *Hupotassō* does not mean subservience or submitting out of servile fear. *Hupotassō* is not an invitation to be abused or taken advantage of, nor should it result in inequality or injustice. Rather, it is a humble recognition of our preeminent relationship to God, which then shapes all of our other relationships. Each person is loved by God, no matter what his or her position or standing within the church or community. We are all disciples, freely subject to God’s loving will.

⁶⁷ Strong’s Concordance G5021 ὑπότασσω. This verb occurs at least seven times in the New Testament: in Matthew, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians.

⁶⁸ Although the exploration and application of the biblical concept of *hupotassō* in this article may be distinct from some existing studies of this concept, it hopefully will prove fruitful for readers. General studies of this concept as it relates to peace and peacemaking may be found in the works of John Howard Yoder, Alain Epp Weaver, and Jamie Pitts, among others.

⁶⁹ Justin Glyn, “‘Pied Beauty’: The Theological Anthropology of Impairment and Disability in Recent Catholic Theology in Light of Vatican II,” *Heythrop Journal* 60, no. 4 (July 2019): 571–84, at 580.

The bishops remind the church and disciples that “we are one flock that follows a single shepherd,” and in light of “the unique gifts disabled individuals have to offer the Church,” we are to respond to “the need for their fuller integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life.”⁷⁰ “For most Catholics, the community of believers is embodied in the local parish. The parish can be the door to participation for persons with disabilities.”⁷¹ Starting in the parish, we will see peace dwell among us as each disciple, with or without impairments, cooperates with God to align him- or herself with the gift of peace ordained by God.⁷² In light of creation in the image and likeness of God, and of the baptismal grace of immersion into the death and Resurrection of the Prince of Peace, each disciple can freely choose to build up the peace of the church. Each disciple, with and without impairments, offers a unique contribution to order and peace in the parish.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. *Hupotassō* can be elucidated at least in part as a voluntary placing of oneself in the peaceful order created by the triune God, perhaps analogously like taking our seat at the family dining table or our proper chair as a musician in an orchestra.⁷³ Each disciple can contribute a distinct gift to the church. *Hupotassō* is not a passive stance but one that honors divine providence, truth, peace, community, and covenant. The practice of *hupotassō* can build up the peace, harmony, and order of a parish.

Sadly, many of our sisters and brothers with impairments are not reaping the benefits of *shalom* in our parishes, and thus cannot take for granted a seat at the table.⁷⁴ Whether intentionally or not, the actions of parishioners can result in the exclusion of those with impairments and possibly their families. Our peace is lessened when our sisters and brothers sit outside because of ignorance, fear, or apathy. To the degree that we subject others to our

⁷⁰ *Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities.*

⁷¹ *Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities.*

⁷² John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, §165.

⁷³ *Hupotassō* (ὑποτάσσω) is a compound Greek verb; Strong’s Concordance G5293. In the New Testament, this verb is found in Luke, several Pauline letters (including Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Titus, Hebrews), James, and Peter. *Hupotassō* in the middle voice can mean to put oneself under *taxis* (τάξις): to place oneself under order and structure. The verb *tasso* τάσσω (Strong’s Concordance G5021), meaning to place in a certain order or to arrange, occurs at least seven times in the New Testament: in Matthew, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. The noun *taxis* (Strong’s Concordance G5010) indicates an arrangement or right ordering, and is used at least eleven times in the New Testament: in Luke, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and Hebrews. Of these, *taxis* is used at least seven times in reference to priesthood.

⁷⁴ See for example Matthews, “Being Disabled and Disability Theology,” 296–97.

thoughts, desires, and actions (in opposition to *hupotassō*) rather than freely place ourselves in God's good order, we stand in the way of peace in the parish.⁷⁵ In what ways are we actively seeking to recognize and honor the strengths and talents of each parishioner, regardless of age or ability? When we fail to honor the gifts of others, including those with any kind of impairment, we run the risk of becoming an obstacle to *shalom* and hampering the spread of the Good News.

Wherever and however it exists, this ongoing gap undermines the coming to fruition of God's gift of peace to the church. *Hupotassō* challenges each Christian and every Christian community (including the parish) to cooperate with God to actively promote peace and tranquility, by reverencing Jesus as the Lord, striving to become part of the shared peace and order of the church, building up covenant relationships with our sisters and brothers in Christ, humbly exercising charity, serving as Jesus served, and not putting up barriers to others enjoying *shalom*. "Bridget Brown ... wants others to know that each and every person is precious. 'The world needs to know that I don't "suffer" from Down syndrome,' she wrote in a letter to Pope Francis. 'I have a full and wonderful life, and I am filled with joy to be alive.'"⁷⁶

This challenge is set before every disciple, regardless of whether she or he has any obvious impairments. Too often, persons with significant impairments are perceived and treated, even if unintentionally, as always receiving, and not as being able to contribute or achieve. The New Testament reveals that Christ did not see or treat impaired people this way, but rather He invited all to follow Him and to help in spreading the seed of the Good News.

The shared practice of *hupotassō* is one way of actualizing the eucharistic community, regardless of ability or social status. None of us through our body, mind, or soul can demand, or deserve, the Eucharist. It comes to us in our weakness and dependence on God. *Hupotassō* recognizes that Jesus is offering peace to every person of every ability in every situation at all times and in all places, and it demonstrates an appreciation of the reality that every Christian regardless of ability shares in the covenant.

Scripture offers a bold vision of *hupotassō*, a seeking to embrace the order and peace brought by Jesus: in our relationships with God, self, others, and creation. The gospel description of Jesus returning with the Holy Family in the second chapter of Luke may be the paradigmatic description of *hupotassō*, insofar as Jesus who is the only begotten Son of God accepts and embraces the good order and the demands of family. The very Son of God takes His

⁷⁵ See Luke 14:7–11.

⁷⁶ Hannah Brockhaus, "The World Needs to Know that I Don't 'Suffer' from Down Syndrome," *Catholic News Agency*, October 26, 2017.

place in a human family, coming into the world as a baby dependent entirely on others.

Are we ready to imitate Him in our parishes and covenant family, to recognize our own dependence on God and to embrace the goodness and the demands of *shalom* and order? In our parishes, to what extent are we intentionally practicing the good order of God's peace, given to us in and through the eucharistic sacrifice, by acting in ways that promote and welcome true participation and the contributions of disciples with impairments—in the Mass, in catechetical activities, in our prayer groups and Bible studies, at parish celebrations?

In a world of “insatiable greed,” which Pope Francis has warned about, the practice of *hupotassō* invites us to turn away from the idols of power, privilege, status, and wealth.⁷⁷ With the support of a parish as our true home, formed in the right order instituted by God, we can rightly see the weakness of human power, even when exercised by well-intentioned practitioners (in law, medicine, social services, etc.). This practice can inform individual acts, such as the examination of conscience, as well as communal penance services. Are we serving the Lord, and serving our sisters and brothers in Christ? Have we (unintentionally) marginalized or avoided those with significant impairments?

Hupotassō also cautions against some of the specific dangers of for-profit motivations in human service organizations and systems that are supposed to support vulnerable people. Are we unintentionally serving economic goals as false idols? By emptying ourselves, we can acknowledge Jesus as Lord and become more obedient to that authority which Jesus enables: the authority of loving service to the other rather than to the idol of greed. We so often start out with good intentions to serve the vulnerable but eventually come to see that they also serve us, in a Christian sense of the word.

Hupotassō is by no means straightforward, easy, or quick. It is a task that we must take up day by day. Yet it is possible, particularly when we are formed by and are part of a strong and close covenant community, and are sharing the work of liturgy and practicing hospitality. Do we see disciples with impairments in our Bible studies, prayer groups, or ministry teams? The practice of *hupotassō* emphasizes the personal in the communal: communalities that are small enough for Christians to know, love, and share peace with one another in a very intimate way. How open are we to friendship with those impaired in mind or body? *Hupotassō* is enabled through our immersion into the local church; we act for peace not by ourselves but as a

⁷⁷ Francis, Nativity Mass (December 24, 2018), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20181224_omelia-natale.pdf.

member of the covenant community that welcomes and invites those with impairments.⁷⁸ Such a parish can shine as an example of Christ's peace when we help one another to develop such friendships.

Scripture affirms that Christ has reconciled the peoples.⁷⁹ Jesus reordered the covenant community in His time and place to restore those who had been excluded—the blind beggar, the daughter plagued by a demon—and invites His followers to enter into this same work of *hupotassō*.⁸⁰ As we look around our parishes, where are our sisters and brothers with impairments? Are they around the eucharistic table? In our sacramental preparation and formation classes? Serving on committees? Joining the parish picnic? Leading prayer?

Christian communities are called to a reordering in this world to better reflect the work of the "Spirit who is love and gives unity in diversity."⁸¹ Those gathered together by God's gift of peace in the local Christian community can no longer settle for implicit segregation based on (assumed) distinctions of ability or degrees of vulnerability. Dawn DeVries notes that "Whatever 'orders' of creation there may be, no individual part of the creation can claim ontological superiority ... To this extent, the 'able-bodied' cannot claim an elevated status in creation ... Ultimately, all stand, qua creatures, in the same creaturely relation to God."⁸² *Hupotassō* thus incorporates a recognition of each and every person's ontological vulnerability, and by extension, of the vulnerability of the Christian community gathered around the Good Shepherd.⁸³ We are not redeemed by our strength and intellect, nor do we build up *shalom* in the world through human effort alone.

Contemplation of a parish community should catch a vital glimpse of the moral order wrought by Jesus and extended particularly to those on the margins. To the world, this may seem startling. John Swinton notes that the peace exemplified in the Beatitudes is "upside down"—the last and the weak are actually the first and the strong.⁸⁴ To what extent is this true in

⁷⁸ See Jacober's Hesed conference paper on the necessity of community.

⁷⁹ 2 Cor 5:18–19; Eph 2:13–22.

⁸⁰ Lk 18:42; Mt 15:21.

⁸¹ Benedict XVI, General Audience (May 7, 2008), http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080507.pdf.

⁸² DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," 134.

⁸³ Cooreman-Guittin, "Growing in Humanity," 143–54. Note that this is not to diminish the pain and suffering that accompany vulnerability in our fallen world.

⁸⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 16. See previous note on L'Arche and the accusations against Vanier.

our parishes, particularly in the ways that those with and without impairments live, celebrate, pray, contemplate, and worship together?

Hupotassō is not just an individual practice but can and should be taken up by the parish. Christian communities are called to a reordering, or more precisely to allow God to reshape us so that we more and more closely reflect the work of the Spirit. This is a more profound and a richer vision of diversity, one that goes beyond the typical parameters of what is counted as such in the world today. A church that more fully reflects the beauty of unity in diversity, including diversity of vulnerability, is a church that has embraced the gift of peace from Christ and that continues to strive to live out and to share that order and peace.⁸⁵

To sharpen this point, the shared practice of *hupotassō* can be understood as both pruning and growth: getting away from entanglement in the false norms and means of the state, society, and organizations (thus pruning), and simultaneously moving closer toward the Lord's peace (which demonstrates growth). The discipline of *hupotassō* calls us together and individually to put down those things (attitudes, practices, habits) that limit or weaken peace and to pick up those things that foster true peace. As disciples who are part of parishes, dioceses, and the church, if we put all of our hopes in laws around accessibility and education, or in a medical model of impairment, we are at risk of missing the true nature of *shalom*. If we acquiesce to the common worldly pattern of ever-increasing reliance on psychotropic drugs, on testing and genetic manipulation, or on selective abortion, we at the very least risk an idolatry of human intellect and power.

In many instances, communities of faith feel somewhat ill-equipped at knowing what to do or say to welcome a person with a disability into their faith community. They therefore respond by attempting to develop a program or activity for the individual rather than getting to know the person first and allowing the relationships within the community to develop naturally, allowing the individual's involvement to flourish on its own. In most cases, the need for special programs or activities may not be needed, and, in fact, may be viewed as efforts to exclude them from full participation in the life of the community.⁸⁶

This is not to underestimate the potential relevance and validity of approaches concordant with faith and reason. Pedagogical strategies can be very useful and good, for example, the power of role modeling and imitation

⁸⁵ On diversity of vulnerability and impairment, see Iozzio, "Thinking about Disabilities with Justice, Liberation, and Mercy," 35–36.

⁸⁶ J. Martin Benton, JD, "Experiencing Belonging in a Welcoming Congregation: A Personal Journey Living with Cerebral Palsy," *National Catholic Partnership on Disability*, 2018.

in regard to people with and without impairments worshipping together; the teaching strategies built into the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.⁸⁷ Psychology can help us to build on approaches that invite empathy and interpersonal identification between and among parishioners with and without impairments. Nonetheless:

Of primary importance is that the faith community takes positive steps to reach out to the individual with a disability, to engage them in a meaningful manner so that they can feel respected and valued as equal members of the community, and to view any adjustments or accommodations that are required for an individual's full participation as routine and not valiant or extraordinary.⁸⁸

To allow professional distance and expertise to govern our approaches as church and parishes is to risk setting aside our creedal affirmation that the Father is almighty, Jesus is Lord, and the Holy Spirit gives life. The best that the world has to offer is not principally what the church needs or indeed presents to the world, although the church can certainly learn from clinical or professionalized approaches that are concordant with reason. The church is not a social service agency but serves the lowly in response to her faith in Christ.⁸⁹ As noted previously, the shared practice of *hupotassō* embraces both growth and pruning. We are likely to be called to put down some things that we like (status, control of our time) and to take up some things that are demanding (patience, humility). This requires time and effort, rather than technological or material "fixes."

In practicing *hupotassō*, parishes are enabled to envision authentic alternatives to more shallow methods established solely on human effort and intellect, and to enter more fully into *shalom*. Borrowing again from Greig, we might think of the practice of *hupotassō* as restoring a "strange order"; not the false and static order of subservience but the beautiful, growing, living order of discipleship and peace, an order rooted in the ever new,

⁸⁷ The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to catechesis and sacramental preparation aimed at infants and children up to age 12. It was developed by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, and is influenced by a Montessori style of education. To learn more about the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, see <https://www.cgsusa.org/>.

⁸⁸ Benton, "Experiencing Belonging in a Welcoming Congregation."

⁸⁹ See Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, 2005, §§31–39, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html. See Pontifical Council Cor Unum, "The Church for the Salvation of Humanity: Diakonia in some Apostolic Administrations and Sui Iuris Missions in Europe and Asia" (July 2–5, 1998), §1.

divine reality of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such reordering is only possible with God's grace.

Diaspora

To the extent that people with physical and intellectual impairments or mental disorders are vulnerable to marginalization, we might profitably reflect on this hurtful social reality in light of scriptural and theological understandings of exile and *diaspora*.⁹⁰ We can find in the Scriptures two expressions that sit side by side: *diaspora* as the pain of exile, and *diaspora* in the hopeful joy of living in this world while not of it. The first letter of Peter calls on Christians in literal exile (1:1) to live as strangers and sojourners (2:11) who are truly at home only with God (2:5). For our specific purposes, we might study the biblical concept of *diaspora* in at least two ways.⁹¹ One, these biblical terms can provide a useful metaphor to consider deeply the

⁹⁰ Strong's G1290 feminine noun *diaspora* a scattering or dispersion, used in John 7:35, James 1:1, and 1 Peter 1:1. Strong's G1289 verb *diaspeirō* to scatter, used in Acts 8:1, Acts 8:4, and Acts 11:19.

⁹¹ The two elements of *diaspora* highlighted in this article are not exhaustive of the biblical concept of *diaspora*, nor are they necessarily the most prominent within theological studies of the topic. Nonetheless, the concept can enrich the conversation around welcome and integration of people with impairments in parishes, dioceses, and the church. Those wishing to study this concept have a rich field to draw upon. Select examples include Benedict XVI, "Interview During the Flight to the Czech Republic (Apostolic Visit)" (The Holy See, September 26, 2009), http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090926_interview.pdf; Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, trans. Michael Moore (New York: Basic Books, 2007); Jonathan Sacks, "On Creative Minorities," *First Things* (January 2014), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/01/on-creative-minorities>; Luis R. Rivera-Rodriguez, "Reading in Spanish from the Diaspora through Hispanic Eyes," *Theology Today* 54, no. 4 (1998): 480–90; Luis R. Rivera-Rodriguez, "Immigration and the Bible: Comments by a Diasporic Theologian," *Perspectivas/Occasional Papers* (Fall 2006): 23–36; David W. Kim, "What Shall I Read? How Korean Christians in Diaspora Read the Hebrew Canon," *Studies in World Christianity* 18, no. 2 (2012): 116–33; Peter Phillips, "Gaudium et Spes: Programme for the Christian Diaspora," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 13, no. 2 (2016); David Reimer, "Exile, Diaspora, and Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Bulletin of Old Testament Theology* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 3–17; M. Daniel Carroll Rodas, "Reading the Bible through Other Lenses: New Vistas from a Hispanic Diaspora Perspective," in *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World*, eds. Craig Keener and M. Daniel Carroll Rodas (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2013); Daniel Smith, *The Religion of the Landless* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989); Marc Tumeinski, "Sent into Exile: The Divine Call to Practice Diaspora," *The Heythrop Journal* 61, no. 1 (January 2020): 70–81.

experiences of many people with impairments and their families. Two, this metaphor can also inform the approach of parishes as they strive to build up peace and unity with and among disciples who are impaired in some way. Both ideas are further explored following.

First, so many people with impairments and their families have found themselves pushed out of, or never welcomed into, those social and communal places that comprise our public lives, including in the realms of school, work, leisure, and religious expression. Although this is not literally a dispersion from one's country of origin, this level of rejection may indeed be experienced as an involuntary expulsion from those spaces that make up the richness of so much of our lives, and thus as a kind of scattering. To see others enjoy home, work, friendship, and belonging while remaining on the outside carries the anguish of exclusion. Biblical accounts of *diaspora* can provide a way to comprehend these painful experiences, while simultaneously being reminded of God's providential love.

Those who are marginalized are in a real sense forced into exile, whether abruptly or more slowly, from belonging, community, and home. The oppressive reality of exile for the Jewish people reverberates throughout much of the Old Testament and continues to echo in the life of the early church described in the New Testament. In light of this scriptural background, consider the ways that individuals can be shunted to the social margins as a reaction to (perceived) impairment or disorder. In a materialistic culture that idolizes capacity and contribution, many people with impairments are in essence rejected by those around them rather than welcomed. Too often, they are not embraced by neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, or cultural institutions.

Francis explicitly used this biblical language when he reminded the church to "not forget the many 'hidden exiles' who live within our homes, our families, our societies. I think of people of every age, especially the elderly who, also due to disabilities, are at times considered a burden, a 'cumbersome presence,' and risk being discarded, of being denied concrete job prospects for the construction of their future."⁹² As noted previously, are we even aware of those in our parishes who have various impairments? Being overlooked can become a kind of relational exile.

Such profound rejection can wound the mind and soul of a person. Paradoxically, marginalization is often enacted and legitimized or at least reinforced by the very structures described as helpful, such as social and human service organizations and volunteer efforts, even if these predictable outcomes are unintended. The church is clearly called to respond to the

⁹² Message of the Holy Father Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 2019.

needs of such (power and status) minorities, to seek out those relegated to the margins, and thus to imitate Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Good Samaritan.⁹³

Second, I borrow the language of *diaspora* as a reminder that the church can perceive the conditions and problems of the surrounding city while simultaneously living as a resident alien, maintaining fidelity to the ways of the gospel rather than getting caught up in the false solutions proposed by the city. In other words, though scattered far from our true home, we can continue to preach the Word.⁹⁴ Christians can draw upon the Good News and the grace of life in Christ to embrace her sisters and brothers with impairments, while avoiding any false paths and worldly strategies promoted by societal and service structures. This is a kind of *diaspora*, relying on God's grace to live as an exile, in but not of the world. Such *diaspora* communities can still help the world, as Jeremiah's letter to the exiles proclaims. Parishes can draw upon the grace of incorporation into the Body of Christ to act as a creative minority, building a true community of peace for all, regardless of ability or social status. This can act as an example to the world.

After all, the church herself is a *diaspora* community on the way—on pilgrimage in this world; seeking not the path of power or wealth, but rather of the Beatitudes. Depending on where and how they live, many Christians may find this idea of freely accepting *diaspora* as unimaginable or nonsensical.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, even before the necessity to go out to all the world teaching the good news, Christians and the church must walk the way inaugurated by Jesus. This path is a voluntary *diaspora*, a willingness to be scattered and sent by the Lord, to be pilgrim communities, and to live in a way that is not of this world.⁹⁶ The peace of the church lies predominantly in following this demanding *diaspora*, not a literal scattering but a spiritual path.

The call is not to build a city, a tower, and a name of our own making, as the Babel account in Genesis warns us, or to hide behind walls, rejecting God's command to go forth. Rather, we are to live in covenant relationship with God and to go out to all the world, be fruitful, and multiply. The gospels describe a vision of a shared life of grace that can embrace all. In letting go of worldly approaches, parishes can find the creativity to imagine and embrace faithful ways of living together as pilgrims inspired by the good news.

⁹³ Not necessarily a numerical minority.

⁹⁴ Acts 8:4.

⁹⁵ Melanie Kampen, *Imagining the Ethics of Diaspora* (Waterloo, ON, Canada: Theory Printers, 2013), 3.

⁹⁶ Jn 15:19, 17:14–16.

We might consider *diaspora* from the perspective of *hupotassō*, or at least as a kind of continuation of *hupotassō*. Freely placing oneself in the order of God, and being subject to one another out of reverence for God, is a taking of the Lord's way, which is not the world's way, and thus is a kind of scattering or exile from the familiar.⁹⁷ Once again, this path is not easy nor is it always straightforward.

The Lord took a distinctive and minority path, and called His disciples to follow Him. He did not follow the customary ways of excluding those with obvious impairments. We know from the gospels that Jesus sought out those on the edges, including those hidden exiles who were marginalized by society due to impairment or vulnerability. His actions continue to speak to us and inspire us today. Likewise, eucharistic community with vulnerable persons in a local parish will stand out as something strangely wonderful, beautiful, and peaceful. It represents a singular way, not one that many will take, and thus is a kind of *diaspora*: a voluntary going out where the Lord leads, not where the world leads. This may seem absurd to the world but, paradoxically, this embrace of our pilgrim status brings us to our real home.

All too often society creates separate, professional, supposedly specialized, programs that in essence keep children, adults, and elders who are vulnerable outside the gates. How often are those who are most hungry for human touch and relationship surrounded instead predominantly by professionals paid to be in their lives, and dominated by technologies and therapies? This imposition of exile in the name of helping and professionalism, even when it occurs in a parish, is not the way of the church.

An exilic community dependent on God, a stance of *diaspora* paradoxically brings the church a certain freedom to act and create, and to not be constrained by idolatrous notions of community or of service. Grounded in God's love, a parish can live out new forms of friendship with those often ignored or set apart by society, thus acting as leaven and as creative minorities in the world.⁹⁸ The world may rightly wonder at a church that does not unthinkingly adopt typical secular approaches: the laws and methodologies of rights or inclusion, for instance, but instead with faith and imagination creates more authentic ways of living and celebrating. We are not one because of laws but because Christ Jesus has redeemed and united us in His body.

⁹⁷ Consider the scriptural narratives around Abram and Sarai, or Ruth, as examples.

⁹⁸ In part, we see this in the founding of L'Arche. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, trans. Michael Miller, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 145; Benedict XVI, "Interview During the Flight to the Czech Republic (Apostolic Visit)" (The Holy See, September 26, 2009), http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090926_interview.pdf; Ratzinger and Pera, *Without Roots*, 121–22.

The church sees what the gift of community is and how to embrace it. She relies not on her efforts but on God's love, wisdom, and grace. *Diaspora* may lead one in strange pathways, strange at least to the world, yet pathways that are peace and that lead to peace. When a parish takes this way together, with all of our weaknesses, dependencies, vulnerabilities, and impairments, we can also taste God's true peace together.

Parishes should be able to respond creatively and imaginatively to the identities and needs of companion disciples who are vulnerable due to impairment. *Diaspora* ideally allows the church to take on a pilot function in the world, showing the beauty of what is possible by lived example. Do our celebrations of Word and Eucharist, and our catechetical programs, stand out as a striking witness of the possibilities and the gifts of welcoming our sisters and brothers with impairments? Do others look at our Catholic schools and parishes, and the relationships between and among disciples with and without impairments, and say "see how they love one another"? Are we recognizing and honoring the fruits of ministry offered by those disciples with impairments?

The life and the witness of a parish community at peace, with all the members of the Body of Christ with their various differences and vulnerabilities striving to live in unity as a covenant family, can act as a beacon and an example that the world can learn from, at least in part. Not that it will be perfect, but the *diaspora* community can act as a beacon when it is a visible community, with a distinct identity and clear borders, open to new members, providing a viable alternative to the dominant ways of life in a particular society, and seeking to serve the world.⁹⁹

Beauty

One of the fruits of *hypotassō* and *diaspora* is that the church at peace grows in moral beauty. Such beauty can both bring joy to Christians and

⁹⁹ See Daniel Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*; Harry Huebner, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, ON, Canada: Pandora Press, 2005); Daniel Smith-Christopher, "Prayers and Dreams: Power and Diaspora Identities in the Social Setting of the Daniel Tales," in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, eds. John Collins and Peter Flint, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 269–70; John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997); Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002); Daniel C. Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Ratzinger and Pera, *Without Roots*.

attract others to Christ. To enter freely into God's peace, to welcome those on the margins, to follow the way of the Lord and to act as a creative minority, contributes to the peace of the church and thus the world. Such peace has the marks of beauty: clarity, harmony, and integrity.¹⁰⁰ A deep family unity among Catholics with and without impairments, lived out in the church and parish, is an exercise of faith that will provide a profoundly attractive witness.¹⁰¹ Beauty can inspire and motivate change. To see a parish of disciples of all ages, abilities, and economic backgrounds gathered around the one bread is to behold the striking beauty of harmony and order. Imagine your own parish on a typical Sunday, and then ask yourself if a visitor would see people with impairments of all ages in the pews and in the sanctuary. If not, imagine the beautiful witness if that were to become true, and ask yourself what it would take to bring about.

We might keep in mind a common refrain of the last three popes—that beauty will save the world, to echo Dostoevsky.¹⁰² Disciples are called to welcome the harmonious integrity of encounter with the other: a recognition of shared weakness and dependence on the Good Shepherd, a depth of solidarity with our sisters and brothers in faith, the practice of humility in relationship and Christian friendship, the exchange of the sign of peace at Mass, and shared celebration both inside and outside of Mass among people of all abilities. Disciples too are called to take up, as necessary, the pain of walking side by side with those who suffer. This can mean metaphorically leaving our sense of security to journey with exiles hidden in our midst. What can be just as challenging, if not more, is to accept such accompaniment from others in the times of our own dependence, weakness, and vulnerability. These can be moments of beauty that can engender peace.

As a parish learns to intentionally embrace the multifaceted gift of peace, becoming a place of welcome for all who are wounded, it magnifies beauty in space and time. It will indeed take time. *Hupotassō*, *shalom*, and the witness of beauty require time, patience, and slowness if they are to bear good fruit.

¹⁰⁰ These represent three indicators of beauty described by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 39, A. 8.

¹⁰¹ Pietro Cardinal Parolin, *Message to the 41st Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples* (August 5, 2020), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/08/17/200817a.pdf>.

¹⁰² John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (April 4, 1999), http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.pdf; Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Artists*, November 21, 2009, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.pdf; Francis, *Encyclical Lumen Fidei* (June 29, 2013), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_encyclica-lumen-fidei.pdf.

According to Hauerwas, “Peace creates time by its steadfast refusal to force the other to submit in the name of order.”¹⁰³ It takes time spent in prayer, in celebration, in friendship, and in sharing meals among disciples with and without impairments, as the witness of L’Arche so powerfully communicates.¹⁰⁴ Parishes too can dedicate time to foster such beautiful practices, shared by all parishioners with and without impairments.

John Paul II noted the iconic beauty and witness of vulnerable people, and the gift of peace that this beauty fosters, as noted at the beginning of this paper. As just one illustration, L’Arche communities ideally provide glimpses of a place for all people, those with and without impairments, to discover the integral beauty of who they are and to recognize that they are truly loved.¹⁰⁵ The focus at L’Arche is not fixated on impairment, but on the dignity and gifts that all people share. Our parishes also can grow to become places and times of transfiguration to the degree that we cultivate the faith and the ability to see the beauty and dignity of people with significant impairments.¹⁰⁶

We understand from the gospel accounts that the Transfiguration is a striking experience of beauty, a mystery that gives peace and that prompts worship.¹⁰⁷ Christ is gloriously transformed, and the Lord’s beauty becomes visible to the disciples in its integrity, harmony, and clarity. We may have had the experience of truly seeing the beauty of a person with impairments in our midst. In a culture that so often portrays impairment, and thus by extension impaired people, as ugly, the gospel proclaims the real beauty of those whom others are so often ready to ignore or avoid.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, the Transfiguration speaks to us also of transformed faith. The faith of Peter, James, and John is transformed, and they can then see the beauty of the Lord. “The disciples’ ascent up Mount Tabor leads us to reflect on the importance of disengaging from worldly matters, in order to make a journey toward heaven and to contemplate Jesus.”¹⁰⁹ Our faith too can be metamorphosed so that we can more truly see what and who is

¹⁰³ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 37–38. See Murphy, “Learning Compassion through Practices of Encounter in L’Arche,” 6.

¹⁰⁵ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 26. Again, this is not to overly romanticize the reality of vulnerability and impairment, but to respect the gospel message around grace and weakness, for example, in the Beatitudes, many of the parables, Paul’s letters.

¹⁰⁶ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 25, 47–48. See Jacober, “Hesed,” 5.3.

¹⁰⁷ Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36. See also 2 Peter 1:16–18.

¹⁰⁸ We may profitably reflect upon Isaiah 53:2 in this context.

¹⁰⁹ Francis, Angelus message (August 6, 2017), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2017/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20170806.pdf.

right in front of us. Rather than being lured by the false brightness of physical attractiveness, Christians learn to see the beauty of vulnerability and dependence upon God, whether in the other or in ourselves.

Regarding transformation and *shalom*, the lived experience of many L'Arche communities demonstrates that walls built on fear, loneliness, and the absence of God began to disappear in the face of the beauty of shared peace, order, and harmony.¹¹⁰ This lowering of walls may eventually open our eyes, and open the door, to the beauty of peace lived out in relationship with our sisters and brothers. Our communal experience of beauty can also clarify our vision, our ability to see the world differently—or rather to see the world truly, with the restored vision that Christ gives.¹¹¹

Our capacity as disciple, as parish, and as church to see truly is an essential building block of peace. Beauty brings a clarity that opens the human heart to truth and to goodness—values that resonate with John XXIII's description of order or peace as built upon the pillars of truth, justice, freedom, and love.¹¹² In recognizing the beauty of the other, both space and time—place and routine—are transformed.¹¹³ The reality and the experience of the divine gift of *shalom* itself reflects clarity, harmony, and integrity.

Our relationship with others in our families and parishes can become moments of transfiguration, allowing us to glimpse the true beauty of our brothers and sisters—those with and without obvious impairments—as well as our own beauty in the midst of weakness and to truly enjoy together the gift of Christ's peace, the peace that breaks down the dividing walls of apathy, fear, and hostility.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

In terms of full and meaningful participation in the life of the church for people who are impaired and their families, and the integration that our identity as church demands, much theological, intellectual, pastoral, and practical work has been done, and much remains to be done, over time and in parishes around the world. Many questions remain to discuss—such as around the nature of the relationship between parishes and families with adults or children who are impaired in some way. Further questions wait to

¹¹⁰ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 26.

¹¹¹ See Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 11.

¹¹² John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, § 45.

¹¹³ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 47–48. See Jacober, “Hesed,” 5.3.

¹¹⁴ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 25–26.

be discovered. Nonetheless, even now, the relationships that we are called to in our parishes, and the ongoing transfiguration that is possible, are signs that the church today, as in the days of the Apostles, is still being built up in peace.¹¹⁵ When we are gathered together by God into one body as a pilgrim people sustained by hope, then we can witness to ever new forms of fraternity¹¹⁶ and to that strange peace that is our gift and challenge.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Acts 9:31.

¹¹⁶ John Paul II, "Homily at the Jubilee of the Disabled," December 3, 2000, 5.

¹¹⁷ Miguel Romero, "Liberation, Development and Human Advancement: Catholic Social Doctrine in Caritas in Veritate," *Nova et Vetera* (English edition) 8, no. 4 (2010): 923-57, at 957.