

# CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND THE SACRAMENTS

By JUNE EDWARDS

**S**T PAUL HAS DESCRIBED CHRISTIANS as people who are in union with Christ as parts of one body. He was describing our interdependence one with another. It is important to bear that in mind when thinking of the sacraments and people with learning difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

There are several schools of thought on this subject. One subscribes to the view that 'such people' will not understand and therefore should not receive the sacraments. Many will add that anyway (whatever their age) 'they' are just innocent children, incapable of wrongdoing, God loves them and they do not need the sacraments. During this article it will be argued that this view does an injustice to individuals with learning difficulties and is contrary to the gospel and church teaching.

Another approach is less dogmatic. Children who are 'slow learners' are included in mainstream catechesis so long as they appear to keep up and do not disrupt the group. But then there is often a selective blindness to children and adults with profound or multiple disabilities, with which parents in their bewilderment and grief collude.

A third view is gradually gaining ground and is reinforced by writings and practice over a number of years. Most importantly it is also borne out by the Church in canon law and in statements and exhortations from popes and bishops. Canon law can be misleading because we tend to think we can read and understand it at face value, but, as John M. Huels OSM points out, it is a complex system which may require interpretation by canon lawyers trained to do just this.

When canon law is properly understood, when it is seen in relation to the Church's ancient traditions and reconciled with sound principles of theology and liturgy, then the conclusions for pastoral practice (concerning people with mental retardation and other developmental delays) will become clear. All the baptized have a right to the sacraments, a fundamental constitutional right that exists in virtue of their baptism into Christ's church. This right cannot be restricted unless there are clear legal grounds for doing so.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to demonstrate that there are no clear legal grounds for denying people with developmental disabilities the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick or Catholic funeral rites.

As people with learning difficulties have the same rights as others to the sacraments, it falls to all of us who are concerned with catechesis to think carefully about the most effective ways of giving people real access to the sacraments and the preparation which accompanies them.

I shall be describing in this article a particular approach to catechesis which can be used with both children and adults with learning difficulties, although the chronological age of the individual should always be recognized and acknowledged. Adults with learning difficulties have a breadth and depth of experience which should not be discounted, but rather remembered and respected.

It is not helpful to deny the cognitive limitations of someone with learning difficulties when considering methods of catechesis, but it is possible to build on abilities, drawing on senses and intuition and using symbol to lead us to the wonder and mystery of God. This can be done with any group of people and need not be confined to the less intellectually able to prove compelling as well as effective.

However profound and multiple the disabilities of an individual, they have potential for faith development. If that can be achieved within the mainstream programme so that neither the person with learning difficulties nor those without are held back because of the integration, that is how it should be done. Many children, though few adults, have experienced this. Attitudes are changing, and there is now a more positive approach to integration than in the past. Sometimes a support catechist will sit in on the programme and give additional input to enable the person to take part. Other children or adults with profound disabilities, poor concentration span, little or no language, behaviour which distracts or is in some way challenging to others, may benefit far more from a special programme such as the one used by St Joseph's,<sup>3</sup> with a Faith Community formed from the parish. When this is the chosen method, members of the Faith Community are expected and encouraged to accompany the candidate to parish masses and other significant occasions. In this way the candidate can become known and can participate in parish life.

St Joseph's Centre owes a lot of its earliest thinking to the Special Religious Education Department (SPRED) at Loyola University, Chicago, which developed a particular method using symbolic catechesis. This can be seen nearer home in the UK in both Glasgow and Belfast, where there are SPRED Centres.

*The importance of symbol in this catechesis*

The symbol by its very nature guides us towards another reality which is non-sensible and enables us to enter into contact with this reality . . .

It helps us to pass

from the visible to the invisible

from the sensible to the spiritual

from the human experience to the

Mystery.

and further –

When we consider the mentally retarded child and we see that he or she

– can enter into communion with creation

– is particularly capable of identifying with others

– understands through association with  
experiences

and we note that the symbol

– is accessible to all without explanations;

– possesses within itself a germ of the reality to  
be apprehended

we become convinced that the symbol is of great value in the  
education of the retarded.<sup>4</sup>

The use of symbolism both focuses and frees the mind, allowing God's Word to be echoed so that the heart can respond.

*Timescale*

The length of preparation for a sacrament is flexible because it is guided by the catechists' assessment of the 'readiness' of a candidate. This is measured by a growing responsiveness to the catechesis and can usually be discerned most easily by the people who know the individual well. Eagerness to be present at the sessions for all or an increasing part of the time and the evidence of positive body language are good indicators. There is therefore an onus on the catechists to get to know the candidate, often before any formal catechesis takes place.

The period of preparation is then tailored to the candidate's needs, but is usually about four to six months, each session taking up to one hour, weekly or fortnightly. Ideally this time is reinforced by occasional afternoons or evenings of prayer which are open to other people, with and without learning difficulties, as well as to the child or adult.

*The Faith Community*

An essential part of the catechesis is the formation of a Faith Community around the individual. Within the Roman Catholic Diocese

of Westminster, St Joseph's currently recruits lay people, on a deanery basis, who will support children and adults with learning difficulties during their preparation for the sacraments. The team members are introduced to a particular method and philosophy of catechesis and are given the skills needed. They are supported both by the Centre and by the priests and pastoral teams in the parishes involved, and are given opportunities for deepening their knowledge of and commitment to their own faith.

The membership of a child's Faith Community generally includes their parents. It is they who will encourage prayer at home, foster awareness of God and God's creation in everyday life, and enable the child to take part in mass. The parish priest and the catechist who is teaching the other candidates are invited to take part in the preparation sessions and become members of the Community. Where it is practicable, every effort is made to join the mainstream sacramental programme so that the learning disabled can meet the other candidates and experience being part of the wider group. So far as possible, all the candidates take part together in the rites which mark the stages of preparation for a particular sacrament. Through their own growth and experience in faith, members nourish and help the person with learning difficulties, as well as each other, to grow and respond to the mystery of God. In this way the development of relationships and trust takes place. The human process of growth and response in the group is the grounding for realizing a fuller relationship with God, through Jesus. The emphasis is on learning through relationship rather than cognitive understanding.

The foundation for the spiritual formation of the mentally handicapped child is the ability to form relationships. If growing in faith is seen as learning the catechism and answering basic questions about the faith, then it is hopeless to expect the mentally handicapped child to respond. It is precisely in this area that he is at his weakest intellectually. On the other hand, if our religion, our faith, is to do with relating to others, relating to life and relating to God, then perhaps this is the direction for our religious education programme. Why? Because you don't need to be 'Brain of Britain' to relate to others, to love others, to love God and to be filled with love. The value of a person, in God's sight, is not measured by his knowledge and his accomplishments. The value of a person is ultimately in the realm of love.<sup>5</sup>

Often it is not recognized that children and adults with learning difficulties are capable of great awareness and sensitivity to the attitudes and feelings of others towards them. They are consequently also

capable of being deeply hurt. Many are conscious of their difference, a difference which makes them stand out in a way which is derogatory, as Valerie Sinason observes in her book *Mental handicap and the human condition*.

The following quotation, while written about the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, helps to identify dealing with this consciousness as another of the primary functions of a Faith Community.

Although there is tension between the good of persons and the good of the community, the healthiest persons are those who share hurts and joys in community; the healthiest communities are those which reverence the immense value of persons. Many people have been so hurt by others that they are not only shy but scared stiff of sharing their personal journey. The RCIA assumes that healing can happen in community through the tender loving care of a community of faith. That assumes extreme gentleness, respectful patience, warm hospitality, and deep faith which encourages persons to blossom in community.<sup>6</sup>

It is of immense importance, therefore, that each preparation session has a format which, in its entirety and in the context of the community, strives to convey the message: 'You matter, you are loved, Jesus loves you and is present to you personally, to each one of us and to the whole group'.

### *The process*

The sessions may take place in a church hall, a presbytery or someone's home so long as there is enough space to meet together, to celebrate around a table, and to use a small area as a special place, a focal point. Often children with disabilities have too little opportunity to visit other children from the parish in their own home. This offers a chance to be taken and may lead to the families becoming acquainted.

The catechist and assistant are advised to take time for prayer, directed towards the aim of the relevant session, just before meeting the candidate and the members of the Faith Community. If the venue for the session is somebody's home, however, where it may be difficult for them to have time alone, then the prayer may take place a day or two earlier, during the joint planning session. Ideally, though, the prayer will be immediately before meeting with everyone.

Before each session the careful preparation and prayer includes giving thought and care to the environment in order to create beauty, peace and welcome. A *Special Place* is made – perhaps simply using a

small table, perhaps on the stage of a hall – which serves as a focus for the spiritual and around which everyone can sit. God is represented in the form of a picture, icon or statue of Jesus. Candles are placed ready for lighting, there may be incense or other forms of aroma, and the Bible, or *Holy Book*, is placed prominently, ready for a gospel reading and message. Quiet, gentle music is played whilst we are in the Special Place and so the senses are attracted and engaged.

It is possible for every part of the session to take place in one room but it is helpful to have an area or corner which is set aside for the Special Place and is not encroached upon too much by the more physically active aspects of the catechesis. Some children (and also adults) with learning difficulties need space and the opportunity to move around. This is allowed for during the introduction of the theme, the symbol and the 'lived experience'. It is not unheard of to use the garden or a nearby park, but usually a part of the same room will be sufficient.

*Welcome* is the first constituent of the session and must be apparent from the moment the first of the Faith Community arrives; then, after a period of settling in, everyone is welcomed individually. This fosters a feeling of belonging. Again it conveys the message: 'We are glad you have come, we want you and we want you to join with us'. Wherever the session is held, the responsibility for this and all other parts of the session lies with the catechists.

The community of people is gathered together and the theme is introduced by the leader catechist, using a symbol as a focus and centring on a 'lived' experience. The experience must be one which the catechist and team is sure the candidate, as well as everyone else in the room, has 'lived'. Occasionally this means some pre-catechesis preparation. That experience is then recalled and deepened, so that the person with learning difficulties has the opportunity to make the intuitive leap to the mystery which is God.

The latter part of the session takes place in the Special Place. The link with the mystery is made by the catechist or helper and culminates in a gospel reading, with a message from that Gospel given personally to each individual and then repeated to the whole group. The precise wording to preface the message is very important. Firstly it is given to every individual – to *me* – with the name of that individual. Thus: '*June*, Jesus says to you today . . .'. The catechist then gestures to the whole group, saying: 'Jesus says to *all of us* today . . .'. People with learning difficulties focus on the present; they often do not easily relate to the past or the future. Usually, too, they are highly aware of self;

they are still egocentric in their development. The implication that Jesus is speaking right now can be powerful. The careful picking out of each individual in the Faith Community, followed by word and gesture which indicates the message is for the whole group too, is designed to reinforce the development of relationships and of a sense of community.

The response to the Good News is followed by *Celebration* with a meal or a snack together before people wish each other goodbye.

As an example: the theme of one session is God's knowledge, care and love of each person; the symbol is flowers; and the human 'lived' experience is seeing the flowers, arranging them in water and admiring them. They are then placed around the Holy Book in the Special Place. The catechist draws attention to the beauty of the flowers and the book together, then gives each person the opportunity to be close to the Holy Book or put their hands on it before reading, from Matthew, chapter six, from which the message is derived: 'My Father knows you. He takes care of you.' The response to that, after a period of quiet, is led by the catechists, who will choose something appropriate, such as the song 'He's got the whole world in his hands'. It is noticeable how quiet and attentive most candidates will be during this time in the Special Place, and it is important for the leaders to be receptive and allow suitable time before the hymn of response signals a shift of focus.

A nine-year-old boy being prepared for eucharist was reported to be noisy and restless at his school and his mother often found him difficult in church. He had a limited but colourful vocabulary and was lively. His catechists were a little apprehensive, but soon both he and they were looking forward to their time together. He was interested and generally attentive. Gradually he showed what could only be interpreted as an awareness of the sacred in the sessions and at mass, and was admitted to the sacrament with his peer group after five months of preparation.

### *Beyond words*

Now let us look at the reasoning behind the process used. People with learning difficulties, children and adults, will have developmental abilities which may range from age nought to seven. This is a wide age range, of course, but a common factor throughout is that abstract concepts will be meaningless. These people think in concrete terms, based on their own experience, and it is in this way of thinking that we must meet them. In addition to this, there are processes going on for them from birth through early childhood which are crucial to what will be most meaningful to people who remain at that developmental level.

The child has a different relation to his environment from ours. Adults admire their environment; they can remember it; but the child absorbs it. The things he sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all in the world about him that his eyes see and his ears hear. In us the same things produce no change; but the child is transformed by them.

The senses are points of contact with the environment and the mind, in what it takes from these, can become extremely skilled, just as a pianist can learn to draw the loveliest melodies from the same set of keys.<sup>7</sup>

Thus writes Maria Montessori, whose observation of the influence of the environment and the senses on the young child has been invaluable to people who have directed their minds towards catechesis and people with developmental disabilities. We now recognize the significant part environment has to play. It too carries the message strongly, complementing and reinforcing the symbol.

Sensory experiences also have a heightened role and are not there merely to add richness to other dimensions. Learning difficulty may not be the only disability. When one of the senses is diminished, the others become even more important. It is possible to build up a picture through feeling an object even when one cannot see. The smoothness of silk, the curve of wood and the smell of fresh flowers convey beauty without sight. The smell of coffee percolating will add to the sense of coming celebration.

Silence and intuition are also major factors in the process. The power of silence, which gives space to reflect, space simply to enjoy the surroundings, the company and the experience, is very telling. Words in this context can be intrusive and distract from the real meaning of the occasion. In the mind, words are so often connected with teaching. This process of sacramental preparation is experiential and is not an occasion for imparting knowledge. The space, the stillness and the silence allow intuition to function and open up the possibility of awareness of God's presence.

Children are said to be closer in contact with their natural intuitions and centredness than older, more conditioned, adults. There has been considerable discussion of the meaning of 'centredness' – that state of knowing something from the centre, intuitively. We cannot explain how we know it, but we just feel sure about it. Everyone has intuition, but some people have learned to use it more than others. Intuition is independent of the ways of knowing that we are familiar with, ways connected with reasoning and our physical senses: it is an unaggressive sense of certainty, of knowing that you know something. It is



different to knowing *about* something, it is knowing it as if it were a part of you.<sup>8</sup>

### *Integration*

Does this process have a place only in special groups, with all the possible consequences of segregation such 'special' activities entail? If symbol is used well, if the other strategies and tools described here are borne in mind, if less emphasis is laid on the cognitive, and if questioning and explanations are left for another time and another group, then mainstream and special catechesis can be integrated – and often should be.

Integration is a difficult thing to accomplish for the learning disabled; acceptance is even harder. If we, as church, do not include people who are marginalized, people who frequently are not valued by our society, we are ignoring what they can contribute to us. We are the losers.

Distressing as it is to say so, it is still necessary to remind ourselves that a person with a handicap is not less a person. The failure of many non-handicapped people to treat those who are handicapped as individuals with equal value is one of their greatest difficulties.<sup>9</sup>

Integration does not usually happen smoothly – it has to be given a nudge or even a great big push forwards. On the one hand, the help required is of a very sensitive nature; and on the other this help is often achieved only by persistent hard work. Again, let the RCIA process point the way with its model of church as community. The fourth period in the journey of conversion, the *mystagogia*, is the time of deepening sacramental life and the choosing of service or ministries. This necessitates a closer relationship with the community of the parish, becoming 'inserted' into it. There is nothing that says 'only the able-bodied and intelligent need apply'. What is implied is a discerning of gifts which we are called to share and dedicate to the service of the community of church.

When children are prepared for the sacraments of eucharist and reconciliation in particular, but also to some extent confirmation, there appears to be little emphasis on service within the parish. But when children with disabilities are truly a part of their parish they can become a leaven, increasing sensitivity and awareness to more general benefit. Mixing with their peers, they give as much as they gain and there is a real possibility of mutual acceptance and respect.

It is when we meet people with learning difficulties taking part in the ordinary life of the parish, greeting people, making coffee, singing in

the choir, being altar servers, joining in pilgrimages and social events, that we become more comfortable with their differences and they become more comfortable with ours. We learn to share, to cry together sometimes and to have a laugh. We become companions. Then it is not the differences that matter, it is the shared humanity, Christ's presence in each one of us. This is the *celebration*, transformed and extended from the meal together at the end of a preparation session to *agape*, communion.

If there is a special quality about catechesis with children and adults with learning difficulties, it lies in their compelling us to think more deeply about our faith, the nature of our humanity made in the image of God, and God's covenant with us. It calls us to be more aware, more sensitive in the way we approach people, and more creative. It requires us to look very carefully at ourselves and our own response to the Gospels: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25: 35-41 RSV).

The challenge of catechesis for people with special needs is ultimately no different from the challenge of all catechesis, but it is more sharply drawn to our attention that catechesis does not come to an end when preparation for the sacraments ends. Enabling someone who has learning difficulties to become a recognized and valued member of the church community, and to experience good and long-lasting relationships within it, is intrinsic to catechesis.

The more profoundly disabled the person, the greater is God's call to us to 'be with' them and share our experience of God's steadfast love. Then we start to glimpse the God within each other and within ourselves. 'We begin by imagining we are giving to them; we end by realizing that they have enriched us' (Pope John Paul II at St George's Cathedral, Southwark, 28 May 1982).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The future of children and our own attitudes towards their catechesis seems to me to be inextricably bound up with the history of our society in this country and with the experience of people with learning difficulties who are now adults struggling for integration. It is for this reason that I have been unable to write about children to the exclusion of adults.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Huels, *Developmental disabilities and sacramental access: new paradigms for sacramental encounters* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> St Joseph's Pastoral Centre is an agency of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster set up in 1977 in answer to the requests of parents and families with members who have learning difficulties.

<sup>4</sup> Fr Jean Mesny and M. Orban, *We live in the light* (SPRED).

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Clifford, *Invitation to communion* (London: St Joseph's Centre, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> James B. Dunning, *New wine: new wineskins* (Chicago: Sadlier, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Maria Montessori, *The absorbent mind* (Orlando: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> E. Robinson, *The original vision* (Seabury Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *All people together* (1981).