

THE GOSPEL CALL (REVISED*)



A Pastoral Statement of Concern

Issued by the Archbishop of Perth, Most Rev Sir Lancelot Goody, K.B.E.
Perth, Western Australia

* The original version of this pastoral statement was issued by Archbishop Goody in 1980. It has been revised in 2018 to reflect present terminology.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons. The purpose of this letter is to awaken Christians of the Archdiocese of Perth, to the Gospel call of response to the needs of people with disability and their families in our midst. Sensitivity will arise as we experience in ourselves something of the isolation of the people with disability.

THE CRY OF THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

We are all with disability in one way or another. None of us is perfect; none of us is fully integrated; none of us fully self-actualised; none of us is fully mature. The greatest handicap we suffer is sin—our refusal to respond to the invitation to love; our selfishness that ignores the problems of others; our hardness of heart. Unless we acknowledge our own handicaps and disabilities, it will be impossible for us to relate well to people with disability whose physical, emotional or intellectual disabilities are serious obstacles to living a full and independent life.



Though it can be honestly said that a great deal is being done in the way of ministry to the sick, there are complaints that the Church of today is not responding as well as it should to the needs of people with disability.

THE MINISTRY OF JESUS TO THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Christ laid claim to a special care for the people with disability as a sign of genuine ministry—

"The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." (Luke 7:22).

This ministry of Jesus was carried out in the early Church as the Acts of the Apostles testifies—

"People brought with them their sick and those tormented by unclean spirits" (Acts 5:15).

The Holy Spirit is at work in the Church. As more people say "YES" to the voice of the Spirit, the image of Jesus emerges in them, sometimes through pain and anguish, witnessing to the mission He received from the Father.

THE SITUATION OF PARENTS AND FAMILY

Jesus in Gethsemani prayed that the cup of suffering would go away. The transition from anger to acceptance often comes slowly. Parents' anger, sometimes directed at God Himself, is perfectly understandable. We must be available to help parents to move beyond anger. Parents can be helped to hand over their feelings and lives to Jesus to discover in Him their Saviour.

From the time parents suspect that they may be likely to have a child with disability, they need support. Sometimes information is presented in such a way to leave them in a state of shocked confusion.

One mother put her experience in writing:

"I remember sitting down on the lounge and crying saying my thoughts aloud and then I started talking (still out loud to God):

'O God what am I going to do? How am I ever going to manage?' What will happen to my child if something happens to me?'



Yes, having a handicapped child is a very special blessing, a special gift from God. I can say this now because he is 22 years old. He brought me much closer to God. I have learnt that there is a much deeper meaning to life."

The birth of a child with disability into a family places great moral, financial, social and relational stress on all members of the family. One partner, for example, may not fully understand or accept, seeking escape through a flurry of activity, even Church activities, so presenting himself/herself as insensitive and uncaring. Many couples have found Marriage Enrichment experiences a great help in deepening their understanding of their own feelings and their partners.

Guilt feelings are quite prevalent amongst parents of children with disability and quite often lead to mistakes in dealing with the child with disability. Even pilgrimages to religious shrines in the hope of a miracle can be based on a deficient understanding of wholeness and healing.

Great financial strain can exist as the family copes with intensive and expensive rehabilitation programmes. Highly individualised rehabilitation can lend itself to feelings of frustration and insecurity on the part of other children in the family.

Outings as a family are often restricted and even visits from friends and neighbours can become occasions of embarrassing incidents with the resultant loss of social life. Well-intentioned friends and relatives can further pressurise and disrupt the family with suggestions of different doctors and/or new treatments.

I commend those parents and families of people with disability whose daily lives are a constant witness to the presence and love of Jesus in our midst. Such families continue to remind us that the true value of a human being is not to be found in his/her abilities and talents, but in being a child of God, called in Jesus to be close to Him for all eternity.

I pray that all parents will be given the faith that sustained Mary in her sorrow. (Luke 2:35).



THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY'S RIGHT TO LIFE AND RELATIONSHIP

I must pay tribute to the many outstanding individuals and organisations for the wealth of loving care shown to families. However, the easy availability of abortion and the disintegration of the family prompts me to issue a renewed call to individual Catholics and Church organisations, parish and diocesan, to support what is being done already and, where necessary, to develop new structures during the International Year of Disabled Persons.



I sympathise with doctors and medical staff in their difficult task and encourage them to be honest, compassionate and supportive. The Church does not deny the right of couples to avail themselves of genetic counselling, for example amniocentesis but the Church must condemn the current assumption that it is right to solve the problem of possible births of people with disability through sterilisation and/or abortion.

As a Church which condemns the view that people with disability should be eliminated before birth, we have a special responsibility to accept them after they come into the world. If we fail in this, our sincerity and our credibility must be doubted and our relationship to Jesus who cared so much for those who were with disability, must be brought into question.

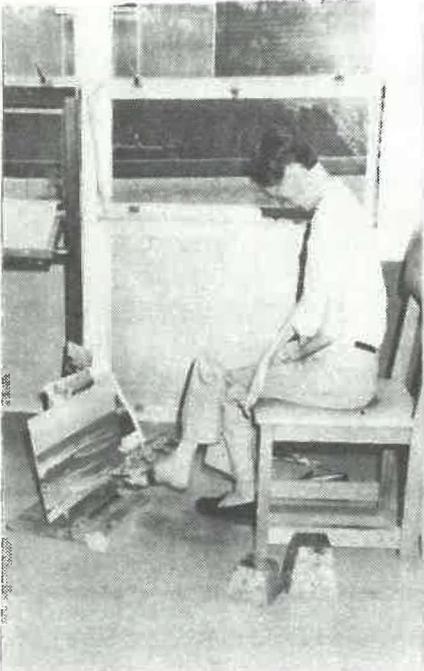
Families with a member with disability need to test their attitudes against sound Catholic doctrine; the Church, on its part, has an obvious teaching role involving an on-going dialogue as new questions are constantly raised.

One can think, for example, of the sexuality of the people with disability. Anxious parents can fall to the pressures of society to think seriously of sterilisation for the person with disability. The Church needs to uphold again the rights of each human person and encourage parents and others to find less violent ways of showing their care.

THE CALL OF THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY TO PERSONHOOD

So far I have not concentrated directly on people with disability. I have rather focussed on the family for it is desirable that the people with disability should be born into and cared for within the context of a loving family. It is within the family environment that is made possible a degree of personal growth and development of potential that is scarcely possible anywhere else.

However, many institutions for people with disability offer an environment with particular positive values that should not be overlooked. Workers in these institutions often see friendship develop among those in their care which might remain undeveloped in a family situation.



Strong feelings of inferiority can occur anywhere and are often coupled with inordinate self-interest. People with disability frequently come to believe that "different" is not acceptable, not encouraged and not respected. When the person with disability feels that his/her contribution is needed and appreciated a higher degree of self worth is established. When people do not believe in their own value—their own loveableness, it becomes difficult to reach out in friendship. Therefore, to develop as a human being, people, with disability or not, need contact with the world outside the family.

It is important then that the person with disability be dealt with in a realistic way. He/she needs to be called upon and given opportunities to grow in a sense of responsibility, developing whatever God-given gifts and potential he/she may have.

THE RELIGIOUS FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

The question of the religious formation of the person with disability is both complex and delicate. It is complex because the variety of disabilities ranges from extremes of slight to profound, from intellectual impairment to physical disabilities. It is a delicate issue because religious formation is of individual people, not classes or categories of disabilities.

Religious formation of the people with disability is a highly specialised area because given the varied circumstances, there can only be individualised programmes. Language levels and types and degrees of disability are crucial elements to be considered. Teaching materials need to be adapted to changing circumstances.



Only too often, even faithful Catholic parents and teachers of children with disability are only worried about the secular aspects of rehabilitation i.e. medical, educational, vocational and social rehabilitation and social integration into society. There is also religious rehabilitation, for example, understanding of Scripture; union with Christ in the Sacraments; which requires the person with disability to be integrated into the work of redemption of God and the Church.

The first source of religious formation for children are their parents. A very basic need is to provide the help necessary for the parents and families of the people with disability.

The commitment of parents and other members of the family of the people with disability is irreplaceable. It is essential that the school and Church support this commitment. Religious formation presents greater difficulty where a child has to live in those boarding situations where there is little or no attempt made to see the need for religious formation.

I urge priests, teachers, parents and others to work together to ensure that every person with disability is given the opportunity to "hear" the Good News.

I challenge you to seek out and explore every avenue of reaching each person no matter what the disability.

THE CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

Over the past thirty years, both Commonwealth and State Governments have taken giant steps towards acknowledging the responsibility of the whole community towards people with disability. We should read this as a sign of the times, examine our own responsibility, revise our own priorities and make our contribution in a spirit of co-operation.

The Church is called by God to pray for and provide helpful care. I have pledged the support of the resources of the Church in this diocese for any woman faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Sadly, in not a few instances, this "pregnancy help" has not been sought. Many times, though, a phone call has opened up the possibility of many realistic options and the way to peace for people in distress. I must thank the many people whose financial assistance and time, have made such services possible.

I recognise the lead given by the development of organisations with involved lay people, joined by priests and religious. Notable in this regard in the diocese are such groups as the Catholic Association for Hearing Impaired People of W.A.; the Legion of Mary in its work with the blind; the Catholic Care for the Intellectually Handicapped.

The teaching of the Church must not be confined to principles only. The International Year of Disabled Persons is a great opportunity for the Church to become more truly itself by becoming more truly the Body of Christ in the world. People with disability, as part of the Body of Christ must be encouraged to take their proper place by making their own unique contribution.

Too often in the past we have failed to recognise the essential unity of Christ's Body as we kept the people with disability out of churches by making it physically impossible for them to even enter. For example, steps, even small ones, are impossible mountains to those in wheelchairs.

It is so easy to forget those who cannot come to our churches, through disabilities or age, waiting at home or in hospital to be remembered and visited.



We have discouraged children with disability from our schools and have excluded people with disability from on-going faith formation. We have refused, albeit from ignorance many times, to allow the person with disability to develop his/her talents or make a contribution to the Church and the wider community. We have cut off families with members with disability simply by avoiding them. The International Year of Disabled Persons is time for repentance and reparation.

The coming year of 1981 should mark a new opportunity for the whole Church to become more sensitive to the experience of these people and to become more responsive to what the person with disability is saying. The ability to respond will depend on a change in ourselves and the way we do things. The International Year of Disabled Persons is a clarion call to each of us to a change of heart — a necessary preparation for the "Kingdom of God". (Matthew 3:1).

People with disability will contribute to the life of the parish and other organisations if invited and encouraged to do so. Examples of people with disability actually taking part in the life of their local parishes are few and far between. Do our Church structures (physical and moral) exclude people with disability?

There are already some signs of change. Some churches for example, are making, or have made, special arrangements to accommodate people in wheelchairs (not tucked into a corner but integrated with the congregation). Some schools have begun the complex task of integrating children with disability either totally or in special units within the school. The blind, the hearing impaired and the intellectually handicapped have been part of a beginning to open catechetics and liturgy to people with disability.



In the wider community, in work and social situations, individuals can continue the task of integrating people with disability into the society, e.g. learning to communicate in sign language, visiting people with disability in their homes, taking intellectually and physically handicapped people on outings.



CONCLUSION

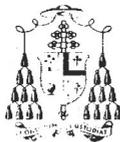
The International Year of Disabled Persons is a year for the whole Church, every parish, every school, every individual, to become involved, aware and responsible. Christ demands a positive response from all of us.

I extend an invitation to all people with disability and those who work with you to come forward and become involved in making 1981 a year to remember not only as the International Year of Disabled Persons but as the year when the Archdiocese of Perth became truly more sensitive and more responsive to the many needs of people with disability.

May Jesus in His compassion for all of us make this International Year of Disabled Persons a time of renewal for all. With Mary, Mother and Servant of the Lord, we stand beneath those countless crosses of people with disability and their families and we hear their cry to be accepted.

May the blessings of God be with everyone who hears these words and puts them into practice.

Given this 20th day of December, 1980.



+ H. J. Goady

Archbishop of Perth

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

- IMPAIRED:** The anatomic or functional disorder of a person, e.g. the spinal condition of a paraplegic is his/her impairment.
- DISABLED:** A person who suffers a loss or reduction of functional ability which results from an impairment, e.g. a paraplegic's inability to walk is his/her disability.
- HANDICAPPED:** A person disadvantaged by a disability, e.g. a paraplegic's problems in achieving access to buildings, in finding employment, in having sufficient financial resources are all handicaps.
- AMNIOCENTESIS:** In this operation, fluid from the womb is withdrawn and examined for indications of possible congenital defects. This procedure is not without its controversial aspects both in its safety and reliability. Often there is a certain pressure placed on the mother for an abortion if any abnormality in the foetus is indicated.

DIOCESAN GUIDELINES FOR RECEPTION OF THE SACRAMENTS BY A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

Once parents have acknowledged that their child is intellectually handicapped and express their desire for the child to receive Confirmation and Holy Communion then the usual norms governing these matters should be replaced or supplemented by consideration of the faith of the family in the love that the Lord has for their intellectually handicapped member.

In practice, if a child gives no evidence of intellectual activity these Sacraments may still be given so long as the child is accompanied by other members of the family.

One important reason for making this decision is to give is to give witness to the love of Christ and the Church for the child who is apparently intellectually inactive but is a person with an eternal destiny and priceless dignity. Once the question of giving these Sacraments to such a child has been raised, were the Church to respond negatively the family would very likely experience a rejection by the Church of one whom they have been taught not to reject but to accept and love. A positive response would tend to encourage them and would bring to life the Gospel scene of Jesus putting his arms around little children and blessing them. (Mark 10: 13-16).

It may be desirable on some occasions, when administering Holy Communion, for the priest or acolyte to give the Host to one of the parents who can then give it to the child to make sure that the child is not upset by a stranger and that the Host is swallowed. This procedure would have the added advantage of expressing family love and unity.

Every effort should be made to help any child who can appreciate these Sacraments to do so. Appreciation will vary, of course, according to the extent to which the child is handicapped. In the case of Holy Communion special catechetical kits are now available and a few people are willing and able to give personal

help to make the reception of the Eucharist as fruitful as possible. This work is of great value.

In the case of Confirmation, if it seems desirable for a priest to confer this Sacrament he will need to apply for permission on each occasion in accord with the general rules.

Consideration should be given in the reception of these Sacraments, to all the circumstances affecting each case and even each occasion. For instance, any appearance of the Sacraments being forced on a child should be avoided. Nor should parents consider themselves obliged to bring a child to receive Holy Communion every time that they do so themselves.

ORGANISATIONS CURRENTLY WORKING WITH THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY IN THE ARCHDIOCESE.

Catholic Association for Special Education Support (CASES): We offer support and advocacy to families seeking a Catholic education for their child/children with special needs and continue to provide ongoing support into adulthood. (25 Windsor St, Perth/ Phone 9328 8113 / Fax (08) 9227 9720/ Email emmanuelcentre@westnet.com.au/ SMS 0401 016 399)

Catholic Concerns on Psychiatric Issues (Catholic Mental Health Support): We provide support, advocacy and promote spiritual well-being for those living with mental health issues, their families and carers. (25 Windsor St, Perth/ Phone 9328 8113 / Fax (08) 9227 9720/ Email emmanuelcentre@westnet.com.au/ SMS 0401 016 399)

Catholic Ministry with Deaf and Hard of Hearing People: We seek to encourage local Church communities to welcome deaf and hard of hearing people and their families through advocacy, education and support. (25 Windsor St, Perth/ Phone 9328 8113 / Fax (08) 9227 9720/ Email emmanuelcentre@westnet.com.au/ SMS 0401 016 399)

Emmanuel Centre: We are a self-help centre, run for and by people with disabilities and their families. We seek to promote the inclusion and full participation of people of all abilities in every aspect of the community and in particular of the Catholic Church. (25 Windsor St, Perth WA 6000, Australia/ Phone 9328 8113 / Fax (08) 9227 9720/ Email emmanuelcentre@westnet.com.au/ SMS 0401 016 399)

Emmaus Community Inc: A Eucharistic-based community providing long-term independent living and support for people who live with mental illness. Also produces and sells Christian CDs and merchandise. (PO Box 535, Bentley/ Phone (08) 9258 7333/ Email contact@emmauscommunity.org.au/ Mobile 0488 708 775)

Identitywa: Identitywa is a registered NDIS provider supporting people with disability and their families throughout the Perth metropolitan area. (61 Fitzgerald Street, Northbridge/ PO Box 278, Leederville/ Phone (08) 9474 3303/ Fax (08) 9474 3315/ Email reception@identitywa.com.au)

Personal Advocacy Service: Personal Advocacy Service is an outreach of the Catholic Church providing one to one friendships and advocacy support for people with intellectual disabilities. (28 Holdhurst Way, Morley/ PO Box 1261, Morley/ Phone (08) 9275 5388/ Email admin@paswa.org.au)