

Actions speak louder than words. It's a simple phrase, but one the Catholic Church and its leaders ought to consider when they remind followers about the value of all human life. It is astonishing that a community that is so strongly pro-life, that insists that its members respect and honor all human life, could abandon the families who follow these teachings. This abandonment occurs day after day all across America in Catholic schools that refuse to accept and educate children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Surprised? I was. I am Catholic, and mother to five children – twins and triplets. From an early point in my triplet pregnancy, doctors suspected that one my triplets might have a genetic “enhancement” – specifically, Down syndrome. When I went to my priest for guidance and support, I admitted my fear of caring for a child with a disability, especially given that I would soon be the mother of five children, all under the age of 4. I wasn't sure I could handle the task. The priest looked confidently into my eyes and told me, “God will provide you and your family with the resources you need. You will see, your entire family will be blessed and benefit from this experience.”

That priest was right. My daughter was one of the greatest blessings of my life, and after her birth I realized that she was, in most ways, just like her siblings. She learned to walk and talk and read and do all the other things kids do – albeit more slowly than her siblings – but successfully nonetheless. I was grateful for the faith the Church had cultivated in me during my 12 years in Catholic school, for without those teachings I might have made a very different decision about the pregnancy. Like most parents, I now find it difficult and even painful to fathom a life in which my daughter was never born, not simply because of the love I have for her, but because of the way she has transformed the lives of others.

Imagine my astonishment when I discovered that the very schools that instilled in me a belief that all human beings have worth were also the ones that refused to accept children with intellectual disabilities. When a parent of a child with special needs tries to enroll that child in Catholic school, they are all too often told, “We simply don't have the resources. We have so many other demands, and we have to educate our typical children.” As a mother of twins and triplets, one of whom had Down syndrome, I understand competing demands, and I know what it feels like to be overwhelmed. I recognize that our school leaders and teachers may feel terrified, under-staffed, ill-prepared. But Catholic schools need to be given the same message that was given to me when I questioned my own ability to handle this task: All children have value. All children bring an essential element to the educational community. You will find the resources you need, and your school will benefit from this experience.

In discussing the benefits of inclusion, it is important to understand that long-term research shows that schools thrive when they include children with disabilities. As you might expect, there is an enormous benefit of inclusion for the children with disabilities. They are in an environment in which they are accepted and embraced, with appropriate role models and social interactions; as a result, their mathematical, linguistic and social skills are years ahead of those of children with disabilities who are segregated into separate, “special” classrooms.

Perhaps the surprising news is that typically-developing children also benefit greatly from inclusion. Numerous studies have documented that, contrary to popular belief, typically-developing students excel in inclusive classrooms. The test scores of non-disabled students in inclusive schools are as high (or higher) than those of students in non-inclusive schools, and measures of tolerance and

comfort with diverse peoples are stronger. These data come largely from public schools, but there are indeed some Catholic schools around the country that have successfully implemented inclusive programs, and they have experienced these same successes. I have assisted with the inclusive process in some of these Catholic schools, and have witnessed the positive transformation first hand.

How is this so? Many falsely assume that when students with disabilities are included in classes with non-disabled students, they will consume more of the resources, attention, and time – and consequently students without disabilities will suffer. The data do not bear out this fear. Instead, teachers who include with students with disabilities in their classes learn new approaches and alternative styles, and these new techniques benefit all students. In addition, the culture of inclusion creates a learning environment in which all students have a sense of belonging. No student is marginalized, regardless of appearance or ability. Those are the environments in which learning blossoms.

Beyond the academic advantages of inclusion, the Catholic Church must recognize the social and moral benefits of including children with disabilities in their classrooms. By living and learning with children who have disabilities, our typically-developing children learn about empathy, reciprocity, patience and understanding. They learn the genuine value of people who are different. They learn that having a disability does not equate with being unable or less than. They learn all these things by living them every day. What better lessons can we convey to our future business leaders, doctors, teachers, policy makers, and parents? These lessons will help students recognize that disability is just another form of diversity, that people with disabilities are an important part of the everyday world, and that people with disabilities deserve full and authentic participation in all parts of society. When they encounter disability as adults they will respond with optimism, respect, and opportunity rather than fear, ignorance, and intolerance.

When Catholic schools reject students with disabilities – even to provide them with “separate but equal” Catholic education – they send a very powerful message to the entire community. The message is this: Yes, parents, you should find value in every life. Yes, families, you should love and nurture and embrace those who are different, those with special needs. But.....NO, we will not be there to support or educate those children. They do not belong in our schools with our children without disabilities. Despite our message of acceptance and support for all life, we cannot find a way to include students with intellectual disabilities in our regular schools.

The time has come for the Catholic Church to teach in life what it preaches in word. The Catholic Church has historically been the champion of the underprivileged and the underserved. It has embraced the poor, the sick, the sinners – even the criminals. The Church provides social, health, and educational programs for unwed mothers, for the poor in foreign countries, for dying patients, for convicted felons. But a Catholic Church that is truly pro-life and not simply pro-birth will also advocate for and support people with disabilities throughout their lives, and will start by opening the doors of its schools to all students. An essential component of promoting life is the development of authentic opportunity and hope for individuals who have historically been rejected, and taking a pro-life stance without accepting students with disabilities in our schools is astonishingly hypocritical and undermines every effort to recognize the value in all human life.

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