U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
Sacramental Guidelines for Persons with Disabilities:
Recommendations for Use

*American Sign Language symbol for “I love you.”
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Summary of Revisions.................................................................Page 3
   a. General Principles
   b. Baptism
   c. Confirmation
   d. Eucharist
   e. Reconciliation
   f. Conclusion

II. Recommendations.................................................................Page 7
    a. Physical Accommodations
    b. Parish Inclusiveness
    c. Faith Formation and Sacramental Preparation
    d. Additional Opportunities to Create an Inclusive Parish

III. National Resources..............................................................Page 10

IV. Local Resources.................................................................Page 11
Summary of revisions from the “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities”, by the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017

In 1995 the US Council of Catholic Bishops issued a document called the “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities”. In 2017 the USCCB reconvened and undertook an update to the landmark document and in August 2017 published a “revised edition”. The revised edition becomes the new foundation for our sacramental policies and practices in the church.

Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan Special Needs Leadership Council has reviewed and compared the previous and current versions of the USCCB Guidelines and provides a summary of the changes.

General Principles:
• Revision to establish that Full Accessibility should be the goal of every parish.
  “Full accessibility should be the goal for every parish, and these adaptations are to be an ordinary part of the liturgical life of the parish.” (Section 3)

• Additional emphasis placed on the need to include and provide for all Catholics with disabilities that reside in the parish boundaries, including those in institutions and other living arrangements.
  “Since the parish is the center of the Christian experience for most Catholics, pastors and other parish ministers should make every effort to provide for all Catholics with disabilities who reside within a parish’s boundaries including persons with disabilities who live independently, with their families, in institutions, or in other living arrangements.” (Section 4)

• Clarified our responsibilities to provide evangelization, catechetical formation and sacramental preparation for persons with disabilities within both the Parish and throughout the Diocese.
  “Pastors are responsible to provide evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities, and dioceses are encouraged to establish appropriate support services to assist pastors in this duty.” (Section 5)

• Additional emphasis on the need be inclusive of persons with disabilities throughout the parish and parish programs.
  “…though, as much as possible, persons with disabilities should be integrated into the ordinary programs. They should not be segregated for specialized catechesis unless their disabilities make it impossible for them to participate in the basic catechetical program. Even in those cases, participation in parish life is encouraged in all ways possible.” (Section 5)
• Additional emphasis that persons with disabilities should be active participants in the parish community.

“Having received the sacraments, which “contribute in the greatest way to establish, strengthen, and manifest ecclesiastical communion,” persons with disabilities, like all other parishioners, should be encouraged to participate in all levels of pastoral ministry that are available and for which they are qualified. For example, members of the laity are often needed to perform various services or functions in liturgical celebrations, particularly in the celebration of Mass. In choosing those who will be invited to use their gifts in service to the parish community, the parish pastoral staff and lay volunteers, including ushers and liturgical ministers, should be mindful of extending Christ’s welcoming invitation to qualified parishioners with disabilities. Like others, Catholics with disabilities are not only recipients of the Gospel, but are also called to proclaim it and to be witnesses to its truth.” (Section 6)

• Emphasized attitudes of inclusion in the culture and programs throughout the parish

“All members of the faith community have a role to play in the invitation, welcome, and inclusion of people with disabilities. Pastoral ministers are encouraged to foster attitudes and a parish culture, and to develop specific programs informational materials, aimed at forming a community of believers known for its joyful inclusion of all of God’s people around the table of the Lord.” (Section 7)

Baptism:
• Included new emphasis and guidance about the urgency of baptism for those that receive pre-natal life-threatening diagnosis.

“Parents who receive a prenatal diagnosis of a life-threatening condition should receive the support they need to assure that their child will be baptized without delay.” (Section 11)

• Added they should provide emotional support for families with special prenatal circumstances.

“Indeed, priests, deacons, and other pastoral ministers should provide spiritual and emotional support to families who have received any difficult prenatal diagnosis and offer on-going support before and after the birth of a child, with special concern in the event of the death of a child.” (Section 11)

Confirmation:
• Encouraged confirmation for persons with developmental disabilities even if they never attain the use of reason.

“All baptized Catholics who possess the use of reason may receive the Sacrament of Confirmation if they are “suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew the baptismal promises.” Persons who because of intellectual or developmental disabilities may never attain the use of reason can receive the Sacrament of Confirmation and should be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents, to receive it.” (Section 18)

• Confirmation should be inclusive where-ever possible.

“To the degree possible, those with disabilities should be included along with others during the preparation and celebration of the sacrament. At times, pastoral need may necessitate an accommodated setting and a simpler manner.” (Section 18)

Eucharist:
• Encouraged Clergy and extraordinary ministers to make accommodations for the Eucharist for persons with disabilities.

“Given the paramount significance of the Eucharist in the lives of the faithful, and in light of medical and technological advancements that affect Catholics with disabilities, new questions have arisen regarding the reception of Holy Communion, and circumstances that were once rare have even become relatively common. Clergy and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are encouraged to become familiar with the needs of their parishioners. In many instances, simple accommodations can be very helpful, and should be embraced by all at the parish level.” (Section 23)
• Clarification of the procedures for those with feeding tubes and encouraged them to receive Holy Communion.

“Catholics who require nourishment through feeding tubes are encouraged to receive Holy Communion, as are all the Catholic faithful. Christ is sacramentally present under each of the species, and Holy Communion can be received under the species of bread or wine alone. Since the full presence of Christ and his sanctifying grace are found in even the smallest piece of the consecrated host or in a mere drop of the consecrated wine, the norm of receiving through the mouth remains the same for those who otherwise use a feeding tube for sustenance, and Holy Communion is not to be administered through a feeding tube. For these communicants it will commonly be possible to place one or a few drops of the Precious Blood on the tongue. Clergy and pastoral ministers are encouraged to use these guidelines and consult with physicians, family members, and other experts on a case-by-case basis, to determine how those who use feeding tubes.” (Section 24)

• Clarification that accommodations should be made for people with Gluten intolerance.

“Catholics with Celiac Sprue Disease or other conditions that make them gluten intolerant should be given the opportunity to receive a small fragment of a regular host, and made aware of the options to receive a low-gluten host or to receive under the form of wine alone.” (Section 25)

• Guidelines regarding persons with Alzheimers, that Holy Communion should be offered as long as possible.

“When baptized Catholics who have been regular communicants develop advanced Alzheimer’s or other age-related dementias, there is to be a presumption in favor of the individual’s ability to distinguish between Holy Communion and regular food. Holy Communion should continue to be offered as long as possible, and ministers are called to carry out their ministry with a special patience” (Section 26)

Reconciliation:

• Reconciliation guidelines and availability for those unable to speak or express themselves.

“In the case of individuals who are nonverbal or have minimal verbal communication ability, sorrow for sin is to be accepted even if this repentance is expressed through some gesture rather than verbally. Many Catholics experience significant communication difficulties related to autism spectrum disorder, traumatic brain injury, post-stroke complications, and other conditions. Catholics with significant communication disorders may be permitted to make their confessions using the communication system with which they are most fluent” (Section 29)

• Confession accommodations should be made for those unable to use a confessional.

“Pastoral consideration needs to be given to those for whom reception of the sacrament within the confines of the confessional may be problematic. While this would certainly constitute a just cause for Reconciliation outside of a confessional, every effort should be made to ensure that penitents who are wheelchair users have access to both face-to-face and private confessional, with due regard for the right of the priest to insist on confession behind a fixed screen.39” (Section 31)

Conclusion:

• The revised edition reinforces the need for full inclusion of all persons with disabilities throughout all aspects of the parish community and emphasizes the special gifts these people provide to the church.

“These guidelines are presented to all who are involved in liturgical, pastoral, and catechetical ministry. All persons with disabilities have gifts to contribute to the whole Church. When persons with disabilities are embraced and welcomed, and invited to participate fully in all aspects of parish community life, the Body of Christ is more complete. “The Church owes persons with disabilities her best efforts in order to ensure that they are able to hear the Gospel of Christ, receive the sacraments, and grow in their faith in the fullest and richest manner possible.”
RECOMMENDATIONS
These recommendations were developed by Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan Special Needs Leadership Council and will assist our parishes on key policies, practices, and programs that support Persons with Disabilities.

Physical Accommodations:
• All parish facilities should meet the requirements of ADA Compliance per the standards set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act.
• It is highly recommended that each Parish provide designated, accessible seating for people with disabilities.
• Ensure an accessible sanctuary and spaces for worship with access to the sacraments.
• Place hymnals and printed materials within easy reach.
• Minimize open flames throughout church buildings because of safety issues with those using oxygen tanks or navigational issues for the blind.
• Reach out in the announcements once per month to inquire of parishioners or family members of parishioners who may need special assistance and encourage them to contact the parish office.
• Have appropriate and accessible signage in all parish facilities.
• Engage persons with disabilities to evaluate facilities, such as restrooms, etc.
• Ask what accommodations all parishioners need.

Parish Inclusiveness:
• Have a designated contact within the parish to assist those who need special assistance.
• Parish staff who have contact with parishioners should be trained and aware of special needs programs and refer inquiries to the appropriate parish staff or resources.
• Know which parishes around you offer special needs programs and provide referrals to these programs.
• Make sure low gluten Hosts are available for parishioners with celiac disease or allergies. More information can be obtained from the Catholic Celiac Society and from the National Catholic Partnership on Disability.
• Include parishioners with disabilities in liturgy and ministries. (ministers, readers, ushers, etc.)
• Encourage and expect all parish communities. (Altar sodality, K of C, youth group, various ministries) to include people with disabilities in their activities and membership.
• Ensure that parish events are inclusive and provide necessary accommodations so that all may attend.
• Ensure your parish mission statement speaks to inclusiveness of all God’s children and actively promote a culture of inclusion.
• Include teens and adults with special needs in regular young adult and adult faith programs, or to adapt these programs as necessary to accommodate all parishioners.
• Reach out to people with disabilities in the parish boundaries (including those in institutions and group homes) and invite them to further engage or rejoin the parish. Share the parish focus on people with disabilities and encourage their more active participation in the parish.

Faith Formation and Sacramental Preparation:
• Make religious education classes inclusive and offer special needs Faith Formation and Sacramental preparation classes. Individual and separate arrangements should only be made if a person with disabilities cannot be accommodated in a group program.
• The first response should be to seek ways to address the needs of the parishioner within the context of the parish.
• Parishes should employ a clear religious educational strategy and approach for those in the parish community with special needs. All parishes should either directly provide inclusive parish individual or group programs, or refer people with disabilities who need specialized training to a neighboring parish.
• Support should be provided either directly or from a neighboring parish for sacramental preparation “according to the person’s capacity”. Emphasis should be placed on a program participant’s gifts and abilities first.
• Whenever possible, persons should be catechized with their peers. However, some participants may require occasional or frequent individual catechesis. The needs of each individual should direct the catechetical methods.
• We recognize Parents are the primary catechist. However, it is important that the parish provide any necessary support, materials, and guidance to advance the faith formation for people with disabilities through their parents or caretakers.

Additional opportunities to create an inclusive parish:
• Have special needs Masses periodically and advertise them to the parish and surrounding community. (Turn down the lights, softer or no music, signers, additional designated and accessible seating, etc.)
• Offer special need Faith Formation and Sacramental preparation classes.
• Invite speakers to educate your staff and volunteers about ministering to people with disabilities.
• Provide pew cards with information about how to welcome people with special needs at Mass.
• Be aware of what your surrounding parishes are doing to be welcoming and share that information with your parishioners.
• Start a support group for either specific special needs or generally for people with disabilities.
• Rally volunteers to provide respite services for families during mass or during the week.
• Pair up families who want to participate in a buddy program.
• Provide a designated quiet room for those with sensory issues.
• Provide vacation Bible school for special needs participants or make existing programs inclusive.
• Provide advanced adaptive materials, audio headsets, and braille liturgical material.
• Have people with disabilities as “Greeters” before Mass or handing out Bulletins after Mass.
National Resources:

- National Catholic Partnership on Disability:  http://www.ncpd.org  Lead U.S. Catholic resource on disability related ministries. Extensive resources, materials, programs and special needs contacts.
- University of Dayton, Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, Resources for Inclusive Catechesis: http://ipi.udayton.edu/ric.html
- Support network, and resources for people with disabilities and their families
- National Catholic Office for the Deaf:  http://www.ncod.org Resources and support for the hearing impaired.
- Catholic Celiac Society:  http://www.catholicceliacs.org Links and resources for those with Celiac disease
- Xavier Society for the Blind:  http://xaviersocietyforthelblind.org/
- Broad resources, braille materials and services support the vision impaired.
- National Conference for Catechetical Leadership:  https://www.nccl.org/  Information, developments, and resources for enhancing catechetical leadership and programs.
- Insight on special needs programs and adoption among parishes in the U.S.
- National Association for the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd:  http://www.cgsusa.org/  Extensive publications and programs for Catechesis for special needs
- Saint Mary’s Curriculum for Students with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities:  http://autismreligiouseducation.net/  Sacramental preparation curriculum, and resources.
- Disability and Faith.org:  http://www.disabilitiesandfaith.org/  Training faith-based organizations on how to be more welcoming and accessible
- National Organization on Disability:  http://www.nod.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness:  http://www.nami.org
- Autism Society:  http://www.autism.org

Local Resources:

- Information on Special Needs Ministry in the Archdiocese of Detroit: email specialneeds@ccsem.org
- St. John Deaf Center, AOD Catholic Deaf Community:  http://www.sjdc-oll.org/
- Our Lady of Loretto, Redford – Mass for Hearing Impaired: http://www.ourladyoflorettoparish.org/
- Michigan Association for Deaf, Hearing and Speech Services:  http://www.nadhh.org/
- Michigan Alliance for Families: mailto:info@michiganallianceforfamilies.org
- Autism Alliance of Michigan: http://www.autismallianceofmichigan.org
- Autism Alliance of Michigan: http://www.autismallianceofmichigan.org
- Angel’s Place: http://www.angelsplace.com

Co-sponsored by:  

The newly revised Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities is available for purchase from the USCCB.  
Go to http://store.usccb.org/Ministry.

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