Vatican
Vatican News
A Black woman wearing glasses signs from behind a wooden lectern. The backs of parishione

Corinne Griske uses American Sign Language while serving as a lector during a Mass for members of the Catholic Deaf Community of Long Island, N.Y., on the Fourth Sunday of Advent at St. Frances de Chantal Church in Wantagh, N.Y., Dec. 20, 2020. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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When Enrique Alarcón Garcia, president of Frater España, a Christian fraternity of people with disabilities in Spain, entered the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall as a papal appointee to the Synod on Synodality, it seems one of the first things he noticed was the seating arrangements.

Not where he would be seated, but how he would be seated -- at a round table with other synod participants, "occupying the same place and the same height," Alarcón told listeners at an Oct. 14 Vatican press briefing.

Alarcón uses a wheelchair -- just like the individual depicted in the Synod on Synodality logo -- so synod organizers' decision to forego theater-style seating for tables meant he had full access to the Paul VI Audience Hall.

"The pope has spoken to us through this whole synodal process and tells us, 'No, as a baptized member of the church, you are a member by right, and you also are called to be an evangelizing member,' " Alarcón said. "That brought real joy to my heart and is making it possible for people with disabilities around the world to start looking at the church differently."

But is Alarcón's positive experience of synodality -- an inclusive way of communicating, listening and relating to all the faithful -- typical for those with disabilities in the U.S. church?

"There's the ideal, and there's the real," said Anne Masters, director of the Office for Pastoral Ministry with Persons with Disabilities in the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey.

Masters has for 18 years tirelessly tried to modify discrepancies.

It often starts, she said, with a fundamental attitude adjustment: Those with disabilities typically don't want sympathy or charity. They want to belong, just like every other parishioner.

"Looking at disability as either something to be diagnosed and fixed, or it's an object of pity, and therefore requires supportive human services -- it's patronizing in the sense that it's usually projecting what persons need," Masters explained, "rather than getting to know the person and actually being able to support honest development."

Masters suggests that parishes first ask themselves: "Who is missing amongst us? … And why might that be?"

A simple inventory, she said, can be revealing: "Just looking at the different areas of parish life: Whatever different groups there are, how many individuals with disabilities are present there?"

In the Archdiocese of Newark, Masters said her approach is "both and." There are parish programs as well as diocesan resources and training opportunities, including a pilot formation program focused on general conversion of minds and hearts on persons with disabilities.

"That's the key: breaking through mindsets and forming openness," Masters said.

She finds Pope Francis' own attitude adjustment an inspiration.

"Pope Francis himself has gone through that conversion -- in church-time, nanoseconds. Because in 2016 in 'Amoris Laetitia,' he was totally stuck in the charity model of disability," Masters said of the papal document known in English as "The Joy of Love" released following the synods on the family.

The pope, she said, "got blasted" by individuals with disabilities. "And he listened … and he's continuing to learn and grow and change his language," she said.

In the 2020 encyclical "Fratelli Tutti," Francis was explicit about his own changed expectations and the "hidden exiles" within the church.

"Many persons with disabilities 'feel that they exist without belonging and without participating,' " the pontiff wrote. "Much still prevents them from being fully enfranchised. Our concern should be not only to care for them but to ensure their 'active participation in the civil and ecclesial community,' " said Francis, citing his message for the 2019 celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Jonathon Holland, a University of Kentucky data research analyst formerly at Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, told OSV News the state of disability ministries varies greatly across the U.S. Catholic Church.

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"I think it definitely depends upon where you go," Holland said.

Holland was the primary investigator for CARA's 2016 report, "Disabilities in Parishes Across the United States: How Parishes in the United States Accommodate and Serve People with Disabilities."

Among its main findings: 96% of parishes have a wheelchair accessible entrance; 43% of parishes have a list of resources to refer people with disabilities for professional help; 72% of parishes have people with disabilities who volunteer for the parish; 93% of parishes offer accommodations to allow those with disabilities to participate in parish social events; 63% of parishes adapt their current resources for students with disabilities.

In the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, Bishop Michael F. Burbidge has assured that in his flock of more than 450,000 registered Catholics that the needs of those with disabilities are a priority.

"When we did our listening session before the synod -- as well as developing our strategic plan for the diocese -- that is something we did hear," Burbidge said. "We did hear from some persons with disabilities that perhaps we can be -- as a church, in the parish, in the diocese -- more attentive and sensitive to the needs of persons with disabilities."

"That listening session gave us that reminder to be vigilant of serving our brothers and sisters with disabilities," he said. "We want them fully active in every aspect of worship and service in the church."

Raising awareness is ongoing, he said. An annual Mass for People with Disabilities adds visibility. "Because you don't see persons with disabilities it doesn't mean that there aren't people in your parish with disabilities," he said. "So we've got to be evangelizing."

"It's all the Gospel of life," said Burbidge, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities. "It's the respect and the care that every person deserves as a child of God. This conversation is a respect life conversation."

Burbidge also is completing his first year as episcopal moderator of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability in Washington. That role, he said, "helps my awareness that persons with disabilities are everywhere within our country, everywhere within our church -- and we have to make sure that we are reaching out to them."

The Diocese of Arlington welcomes children with developmental disabilities at 19 of 41 parish schools, with more added each year. Each of its four high schools also

have programs that include and integrate young people with intellectual disabilities.

When filling diocesan positions, Burbidge asks that job-seekers with disabilities are encouraged to be candidates in the hiring mix. "Here at the chancery, we have three employees with developmental disabilities as part of our team," he shared. "They've just made such a difference in the life of the chancery."

The Diocese of Arlington's essential program for children with intellectual disabilities is Special Religious Education Development. Created in the 1960s by a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, SPRED offers activities intended to be both life-enriching and preparatory for sacraments. Around a dozen of the Arlington Diocese's 70 parishes feature the program, with some parishes serving their region.

"I'm always looking to promote the SPRED program around the diocese," said Nancy Emanuel, special needs ministries coordinator. "Anytime I get a chance to speak with priests or leaders from other churches, I recommend that they do start the SPRED program -- because even if they think they may not have participants, they would be surprised that people will just start coming out and really welcome the idea of starting such a program."

Like her bishop, Emanuel is ever vigilant to the needs of those with disabilities.

"I always remind people that being inclusive -- especially with people with disabilities -- is not optional. It's part of Catholic catechesis. It's part of doctrine that we should be doing this, and we should be seeking out people with disabilities," said Emanuel. "They are part of the community, and they should be a visible component of every part of parish life."

Full inclusion of persons with disabilities is, in the U.S. Catholic Church and elsewhere, still a work in progress. The synodal model, however, provides a path.

"If we really become a church of synodality -- and willing to engage in the tough conversations, and be open to thinking about where the Spirit is prompting us and what the Gospel is challenging us to do -- that could be awesome," Masters said. "Then we don't need an Office of Persons with Disabilities because we're recognizing that we need to be concerned about each other, and with each other, and recognizing everyone has gifts."

"But," she said, "it will probably take a while for that to evolve."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.