



# The Infant in My Womb Leaped For Joy

## THE PERSON WITH MENTAL ILLNESS: BEARING GOD'S IMAGE

By Rev. Richard Gill, L.C.

“Whoever suffers from mental illness ‘always’ bears God’s image and likeness in themselves, as does every human being. In addition, they ‘always’ have the inalienable right not only to be considered as an image of God and therefore a person, but also to be treated as such” (Pope John Paul II, International Conference for Health Care Workers, on Illness of the Human Mind, November 30, 1996).

In recent decades, the world has grown much more effective in mobilizing against major health threats such as AIDS, heart disease, cancer and the diseases whose statistics frighten us with their devastating impact on humanity. While our ability to fight major diseases varies, and progress is often painfully slow, it is relatively easy to raise awareness of such threats and marshal human and financial resources to combat them. In the area of mental health, however, the situation is quite different.

### INCIDENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS

It has been estimated that worldwide, as many as 500 million people are affected by some sort of mental illness. That is close to 8% of the total world population. It is also said that the United States has the highest rate of mental illness of all the advanced nations: one in four adult Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year, although serious mental illness afflicts only about six percent. Mental illness is the leading cause of disability for ages 15-44 in the United States and Canada. Yet there is relatively little public awareness of the scope of the problem. And tragically, the stereotypes and stigma which are so often attached to mental illness, help to create a cul-

ture where those who are affected are falsely seen as undignified, or of flawed moral character, or simply as helpless victims or objects of charity.

Mental illness puts an enormous burden on the individual who lives with the illness and on family members and loved ones who provide care. All yearn for a society that accepts people with mental illness and is committed to caring for them and welcoming them as valued members of the community.

### MENTAL HEALTH AND OUR CULTURE

Without addressing in any great detail the range of medical causes and treatments of mental illness or milder forms of mental or emotional problems, it would be helpful to reflect on the impact of a culture of violence and a culture of materialism. Causes vary widely, from inherited chemical imbalances responsible for the development of such illnesses as depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, to brain disease, to causes that are more immediately under our control. These man-made causes, such as those occurring in many post traumatic stress disorders, include in many areas of the world the spread of terrorism, the very purpose of which is to inflict widespread mental and emotional suffering. Similarly, frequent outbreaks of extremely violent and indiscriminate warfare—which so often leave families displaced or destroyed, and social bonds weakened or broken altogether—create terrible forms of mental suffering. War, with its related atrocities and crimes, can bring out the worst aspects of our nature. The aftermath is usually a long, difficult period of painful healing for many individuals.

Additional challenges to mental health arise from the general state of culture, the weakening of moral standards, and trends within the culture that work against the true goods of the human person. For many, especially the vulnerable, phenomena such as hedonism and materialism, all too common in advanced societies, can foster exaggerated hopes of pleasure and reward and distorted notions of what constitutes success. Unrealizable hopes leave in their wake people who are severely discouraged and exasperated. Our increasingly technocratic and production-oriented culture tends to neglect the goods of the spirit, the things that make life more properly “human.” Human values are defined more in terms of a “culture of having” rather than a “culture of being.”

#### OUR RESPONSE TO PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Our faith requires a greater sensitivity and commitment to our fellow humans who suffer from mental illness as well as a greater responsibility on our part to recognize their importance to the community and especially communities of faith. In a society that judges a person on the value of what he or she produces, the person living with mental illness is easily seen merely as a burden on society. The temptation is to isolate or marginalize. As Christians, then, we are called unceasingly to affirm their dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God, and to recognize their value to the community. “It is everyone’s duty to make an active response; our actions must show that mental illness does not create insurmountable distances, nor prevent relations of true Christian charity with those who are its victims. Indeed it should inspire a particularly attentive attitude” (Pope John Paul II, International Conference for Health Care Workers, on Illness of the Human Mind, February 11, 1984).

In what ways do people with mental illness faithfully reflect the image of God? In an address to health care workers in February 2006, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, observed that “the mentally ill person resembles our Lord on the cross; and since the cross is the only way to resurrection, the mentally ill person ... is worthier and reaches such a level of excellence because of the

magnitude of his love and the suffering he endures.” Like the suffering servant, the person with mental illness may experience scorn, rejection, loneliness and deprivation, as our Lord did throughout his public life leading him to the cross. Persons with mental illness do not resemble our Lord only because they suffer. While the suffering of Christ may have special significance to any person with heavy burdens including illness of any kind, it is not the sole source of their link to God. Rather, they are united to God as created in his image.

The dedication of so many individuals at work in the field of mental health, who labor to care for the sick in true charity, and to find ways to alleviate or cure their suffering points us to the dignity of people with mental illness. Often they work amid many difficulties, and it can be challenging to recognize the human dignity of the persons they serve. They labor with few effective tools at their disposal to aid the suffering person. They are not unlike health care workers in past generations who had only rudimentary knowledge of the causes of physical illnesses, yet provided care out of a conviction of the shared humanity and dignity of the suffering person.

Caregivers for people with mental illness must be professionally competent and have the best state of the art training. Yet this is not enough. They also need a formation of the heart, because they are dealing with human beings who need to be treated at every moment in accord with their God-given dignity. Caregivers must be the Good Samaritans who see in the suffering person a brother or sister for whom they are responsible, made in the image of God, and respond to their needs with authentic love. Their solidarity with those who suffer leads ultimately to the encounter with the suffering Christ, whose redemptive suffering gave meaning to all human suffering. Mental health care workers with a deeply Christian understanding of the redemptive value of suffering will go beyond mere human sympathy to authentic solidarity in suffering, an intimate bond between persons rooted in love.

In short, mental health care workers must have a formation that gives them an authentically

Christian understanding of the person, made in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ. This Christian vision of the person highlights one's vocation to happiness and eternal life, one's dignity as a child of God, one's capacity to know the truth, and one's freedom to follow the truth that brings eternal life. A formation that gives them a proper understanding of the person's nature and destiny, and the ongoing affirmation and support of the Christian/Catholic community, will lead them to care for the person as a brother or sister, and to seek as much as possible to restore the person's interior freedom and the capacity to orient his life toward the truth of his existence.

Society can play a significant role in the promoting the mental health of its members by providing effective care, including appropriate health care. The environment provided by society must nurture family life, foster a workplace promoting true human goods and authentic growth of individuals, and offer a solid consensus on clear moral standards by which we will live together, and real objectivity about behaviors which are detrimental to the health of the culture. Only a culture that values the inherent dignity of each person and works to provide a fit environment for the flourishing of persons will be effective in promoting a healthy society.

And finally, the Church community itself has a great opportunity and responsibility to recognize and witness to the uniqueness of each member. Parish communities have great potential to receive and nurture the giftedness of all persons with disabilities, especially those persons with mental illness. The parish community must create that counter-cultural environment, in which all people can claim an equal place and contribute through presence and action. In our own parishes, we must first witness to what we hope will soon be the prevailing attitude in our culture: that human life is sacred and that each member of the human family is welcomed, valued and cherished.

*What can you do?*

- Promote the dignity of persons with mental illness
- Welcome all persons with disabilities into the parish community and embrace successful parish-based programs
- Foster the healthy development of children, including their mental functioning
- Educate society on mental illnesses through awareness programs which include prevention strategies
- Understand and show others that the rehabilitation of people with mental illness is a duty of all society, with special preference for those in greatest need
- Promote social and physical environments that enhance human relations and create for people with mental illness a sense of belonging to a community
- Share the Word of God with persons with mental illness
- Assure that the sacraments are available to people with mental illness
- In educational systems, provide solid moral (and where possible, religious) foundations to help young people form lifelong values and virtues
- Support religious orders and congregations whose charism is to care for people with mental illness

*Adapted from Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, Address at World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2006*

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## Programs for Dioceses and Parishes

The *Council on Mental Illness*, an outreach program of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) is encouraging Catholic observance of the National Day of Prayer for Mental Illness Recovery and Understanding on October 2, 2007 and Mental Illness Awareness Sunday, October 7, 2007. This national effort is designed to promote pastoral sensitivity to, and inclusion of, individuals and their family members who are affected by mental illness. It is an opportunity for dioceses and parishes to raise awareness about this important issue, to educate Catholics about mental illness, and to help reduce the unfortunate stigma often associated with mental illness.

Resources for observing these days of prayer are available at [www.ncpd.org/MentalIllnessAwarenessWeek.htm](http://www.ncpd.org/MentalIllnessAwarenessWeek.htm) and include sample petitions to include in the Prayers of the Faithful.

*The National Alliance on Mental Illness* (NAMI) is making its "Hearts and Minds" program available for the first time, free of charge, through a 13-minute video and 26-page workbook at [www.nami.org/heartsandminds](http://www.nami.org/heartsandminds). The video and workbook focus on diet, exercise and smoking cessation.

*Be a StigmaBuster!* NAMI StigmaBusters is a network of over 20,000 advocates across the country and around the world who seek to fight inaccurate and hurtful representations of mental illness. Whether these images are found in TV, film, print, or other media, StigmaBusters speak out and challenge stereotypes and to educate society about the reality of mental illness and the courageous struggles faced by consumers and families every day. StigmaBusters' goal is to break down the barriers of ignorance, prejudice, or unfair discrimination by promoting education, understanding, and respect. Sign up at [www.nami.org/stigma](http://www.nami.org/stigma) to receive e-mail alerts.

Invite speakers from *In Our Own Voice: Living with Mental Illness* to give a presentation at your parish, at diocesan conferences and high schools. NAMI has trained over 2,000 presenters to share their personal experiences of living with a serious mental illness, their treatment and recovery, and the coping strategies they use to lead productive and fulfilling lives. The presentations include a video, testimony and discussion time. The program is currently operating in 37 states. Visit [http://www.nami.org/tem-plate.cfm?section=In\\_Our\\_Own\\_Voice](http://www.nami.org/tem-plate.cfm?section=In_Our_Own_Voice) to learn more and to schedule presenters.

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## Resources

### Teaching Documents

*Address of John Paul II to the Members of the Christian Office for the Disabled* (Nov. 13, 2004); available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/2004/november/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20041113\\_handicapped\\_paris\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20041113_handicapped_paris_en.html)

*Message of John Paul II on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person* (Jan. 8, 2004); available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20040108\\_handicap-mentale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040108_handicap-mentale_en.html)

*Address of John Paul II on the Jubilee of the Disabled* (Dec. 3, 2000); available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_spe\\_20001203\\_jubildisabled\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/documents/hf_jpii_spe_20001203_jubildisabled_en.html)

Preparation for the Jubilee Day (December 3, 2000). Part One: *The Person With Disabilities: The Image Of God and a Place of His Wonders*; available at [www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/jubilevents/jub\\_disabled\\_20001203\\_scheda1\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jub_disabled_20001203_scheda1_en.htm)

Preparation for the Jubilee Day (December 3, 2000). Part Two: *The Person With Disabilities: Privileged Witness of Humanity*; available at [www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/jubilevents/jub\\_disabled\\_20001203\\_scheda2\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jub_disabled_20001203_scheda2_en.htm)

Preparation for the Jubilee Day (December 3, 2000). Part Three: *The Person With Disabilities: Subject – Active Agent In Ministry*; available at [www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/jubilevents/jubdisabled\\_20001203\\_scheda3\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jubdisabled_20001203_scheda3_en.htm)

Preparation for the Jubilee Day (December 3, 2000). Part Five: *The Person With Disabilities: The Duties of the Civil and Ecclesial Community*; available at [www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/jubilevents/jubdisabled\\_20001203\\_scheda5\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jubdisabled_20001203_scheda5_en.htm)

*Conclusions of a Vatican Conference on the Family and Integration of the Disabled* (March 4, 2000); available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_20000304\\_integration-disabled\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_20000304_integration-disabled_en.html)

*Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (includes 1978 statement and 1988 Resolution on its Tenth Anniversary) USCCB Publishing: [www.usccbpublishing.org](http://www.usccbpublishing.org) or (800) 235-8722; the 1978 statement is posted at [www.ncpd.org/pastoral\\_statement\\_1978.htm](http://www.ncpd.org/pastoral_statement_1978.htm).

### Resources from the USCCB

*Opening Doors of Welcome and Justice to Parishioners with Disabilities: A Parish Resource Guide*. (64 pp.) USCCB Publishing (above)

*Welcoming Parishioners with Disabilities* (8-panel brochure) USCCB Publishing (above)

*Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (24 pp.) USCCB Publishing (above)

### Internet

[www.ncpd.org](http://www.ncpd.org)  
(National Catholic Partnership on Disability)

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)  
(National Alliance on Mental Illness)

[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org) (now "Mental Health America")