

PROTECTING GOD'S CHILDREN
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Our Mission to Protect Vulnerable Adults
By Judge Kate Huffman

Pope Francis often reminds Catholics of our role in caring for the vulnerable and persons living with a disability, confirming the Church's commitment to all members of the faith. He has specifically announced that the Church "must meet people's needs for 'belonging, relating to others and cultivating their spiritual lives so they experience the fullness and blessing of the Lord' for the 'unique and marvelous gift' that they are."¹ Pope Francis described the Church's pledge to focus on inclusion as "each person, with his or her limitations and gifts, feels encouraged to do his or her part for the good of the entire ecclesial body and for the good of society as a whole."² Pope Francis reminds us that "there can be no us and them, but a single us, with Jesus Christ at the center..."³



There are several Church documents that provide us with a greater understanding of how we are to help vulnerable adults in our pledge to include them in all facets of Church life, regardless of whether we encounter them in our specific ministries. These include the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*⁴ (Charter), which specifically addresses how dioceses are to establish and maintain safe environments for children—and later included a revision involving vulnerable adults. Other documents include *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*⁵ and the updates to *Canon Law*.⁶ While we have these definitions and examples to guide us, we should personally consider how we recognize whether someone is a vulnerable adult, as they may not share certain characteristics or circumstances that demonstrate their potential vulnerability. And, we should further reflect on how we can be sensitive to those with disabilities or vulnerabilities while respecting their needs and abilities.

No common characteristics

As many as 61 million U.S. adults, or about one in four, report experiencing some form of a disability.⁷ Disability is a natural part of the human experience and people with disabilities make up a significant portion of the population, regardless of gender, race, age or economic status. Yet the terms "disability" and "vulnerability" contribute little to a full understanding of the unique limitations or concerns experienced by any one person. Misperceptions abound in the common understanding of the vulnerable, or persons living with physical, intellectual or developmental disabilities. Those misunderstandings, largely borne by a lack of knowledge, often serve to cast all into a category with pre-conceived limitations that are not always true, such as—the myth that a vision-impaired person cannot work or support herself, the belief that a person utilizing a mobility device must have a caregiver, and on and on. Another myth is that vulnerable adults are always elderly, and that if one is elderly, it makes them vulnerable. However, what is true is that persons living with a disability may experience challenges related to cognition, mobility, sensory impairments, medical conditions, and a myriad of other concerns.

Even those educated about vulnerabilities or disabilities, including medical professionals, sometimes fail to recognize the abilities of those that might experience a vulnerability. I share the following example with the permission of our adult son, Peter, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy as an infant. By his fifth birthday, despite years of physical and occupational therapy, he could not walk. A local pediatric orthopedic surgeon reviewed Peter's medical records and listened to my responses about Peter's current abilities. Without conducting any tests or even examining him, the orthopedic surgeon said, in Peter's presence, "he's never going to walk, why don't you forget about that kid and just put him in a wheelchair."

Shortly thereafter, a different orthopedic surgeon not only asked Peter questions, listened to him, and included him in all our decisions, but helped him through many surgeries to be a man today who walks without assistance, who graduated from college with a Master's degree, and thrives in his workplace.

This initial stereotyping, and insensitivity by a medical professional, could have severely limited Peter's ability to thrive. Reflecting on this example helps us to think about our own possible beliefs, which could impact how prepared we are to help people around us who may be more vulnerable.

Living with a disability represents just one of many aspects about a person. Many people living with disabilities experience barriers to education, employment, social inclusion and many other life experiences born from implicit and explicit biases and stereotypes.⁸

At the International Safeguarding Conference hosted by the Pontifical Gregorian University in June 2024, experts agreed that the Catholic Church must prioritize safeguarding efforts and ministry for persons with disabilities. Sheila Hollis, Vatican Secretary of State, in her keynote address, acknowledged that persons with disabilities face considerably greater risk of abuse. She noted that "many 'unconscious biases' put a disabled person at risk of abuse," such as the perception that nobody would abuse a person with a vulnerability because of their unique circumstances and reminded us that those with a disability may face additional barriers "to being heard, to being able to explain, to be able to understand" the abuse they experienced.⁹

Dispelling the myths of vulnerability

Adopting practices that facilitate an understanding of the individual, rather than relying on stereotypes or misperceptions, will further our pledge to the vulnerable and those experiencing a disabling condition. Some tips for interaction and treating everyone as unique persons include:

Don't assume

Simply because a person is labeled with a diagnosis or condition does not serve as a predictor of the needs, limitations or abilities of that individual. When interacting with a person experiencing a vulnerability, do not rely on preconceived ideas or biases, but instead, approach the experience with the intention of understanding the person as an individual, with unique interests and abilities. Similarly, do not assume a limitation experienced by a person can be easily seen. While some vulnerabilities are observable and identifiable, many are not. For example, medical conditions, such as diabetes, and mental health concerns may not be visually apparent.

Ask questions

Sometimes people tend to fixate on a person's perceived physical or cognitive limitations. Perhaps ask, with genuine curiosity, if there is a way for you to show genuine care or help to people around you who may be vulnerable or living with a physical, intellectual or developmental disability.

Focus on abilities

When interacting with a person living with a disability, focus on their abilities, not limitations.

Practice respect

As Pope Francis has reminded us, all people, no matter their circumstances, deserve acknowledgment, respect and understanding. Don't assume you can't communicate directly with the person living with a disability. For example, interact and talk directly with the individual, affording them the respect you would with others who do not experience a limiting circumstance.

Use positive, non-stigmatizing language

When referring to a vulnerability or to a disability, the American Psychological Association (APA) urges the use of "person first" language. Person first language emphasizes the person first, not the disability, for example, they are not a "disabled person," or a "handicapped person," rather, they are a person living with a disability.

Communicating our concerns about vulnerable adults

Many cases of vulnerable adult abuse are not recognized or reported. Most vulnerable adults, like all others, are abused by people they know, and more often by a family member or caregiver. Some assume

that adults will be able to identify when they are being manipulated and possibly abused, and that they should be able to make the decision to report or seek help on their own. This is not always true for any victim, including vulnerable adults. Any victim's ability to perceive abuse and to communicate about perceived abuse may be impeded because of close relationships and reliance on caregivers who may also be harming them, and a fear of backlash or embarrassment.

The misperceptions and biases surrounding those with vulnerabilities may also contribute to the failure of mandatory reporters to recognize and report potential abuse of those individuals that the church pledges to protect. To learn more about indicators of abuse of vulnerable adults, you can visit U.S. Department of Justice¹⁰ or your state's Adult Protective Services.¹¹

Vulnerable adults may be more likely to be isolated from other adults, such as in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, in their own homes, or in long-term care facilities. This means it can be more challenging for the abuse to be recognized by or communicated to another adult. The circumstance of a vulnerable may be different than situations of child abuse, where children may be more likely to interact with multiple adults in their daily lives (such as school, activities, etc.). Potential isolation makes it even more important for an adult visiting or interacting with a vulnerable adult to be mindful of anything concerning regarding the vulnerable adult's welfare.

If you have any concerns regarding possible abuse, neglect or exploitation of a vulnerable adult, contact the Adult Protective Services within your state. You can also contact law enforcement. Additional resources may be available through the National Adult Protective Services Association.¹²

Conclusion

Vulnerable adults and persons with disabilities are not all the same, and have different levels of abilities, including verbal skills and opportunities to convey information, including evidence of abuse. In our pledge as a church and as a people to protect all among us, be willing to approach every person as an individual, prepared to understand that person's unique abilities and challenges, as you fulfill your duty to exercise vigilance in discerning and reporting potential abuse of the vulnerable in our community.

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