

## **Arise, Take up Thy Bed and Walk**

“Our Ministry to those with Special Needs”

by Bishop THOMAS (Joseph), Peter Schweitzer and Subdeacon David Hyatt

Disabilities which cause cases of special need do not discriminate between races, socio-economic status, nationality, gender or age. In the United States, people with disabilities are the largest minority group comprising nearly 20% of the population. According to the World Health Organization<sup>i</sup>, there are more than 54 million Americans with a physical, sensory, or mental disability of any kind. Across our world, the estimates are that nearly 15% of the human population is affected in some way by a disability that causes special needs in order to function in society, reflecting an increase from 10% in 1970. If these numbers are correct, it is a statistical certainty that our God-protected Patriarchate has a similar number of faithful who desire to pray, learn and serve within our parishes. The needs are among us and surround us in the societies in which we live, the only question is whether or not we will respond in loving action to provide improved accessibility to our inquirers, catechumens and faithful with special needs.

Any Orthodox Christian discussion of those with disabilities or special needs requires an understanding of suffering. In the growing secular societies that surround us, human suffering, disabilities, illnesses, and special needs are tragedies to be overcome and remedied in this life. Otherwise, human life is rendered meaningless and absurd. This is how the contemporary world views suffering and disability. If suffering can't be overcome, disabilities banished, psychological problems medicated, the human enterprise is considered pointless. Of course, this

is not the Orthodox understanding of human life or its purpose. Saint Basil offers us the quintessential understanding of the human purpose of life on earth.

*“Man was made after the Image and likeness of God; but sin marred the beauty of the image by dragging the soul down to passionate desires. Now, God, who made man, is the true life. Therefore, when man lost his likeness to God, he lost his participation in the true life; separated and estranged from God as he is, it is impossible for him to enjoy the blessedness of the divine life. Let us return then, to the grace [which was ours] in the beginning and from which we have alienated ourselves by sin, and let us again adorn ourselves with the beauty of God's image, being made like to our Creator through the quieting of our passions. He who, to the best of his ability, copies within himself the tranquility of the divine nature attains to a likeness with the very soul of God; and, being made like to God in the manner aforesaid, he also achieves in full a semblance to the divine life and abides continually in unending blessedness. If, then by overcoming our passions we regain the image of God and if the likeness of God bestows upon us everlasting life, let us devote ourselves to this pursuit in preference to all others, so that our soul may never again be enslaved by any vice, but that our understanding may remain firm and unconquerable under the assaults of temptation, to the end that we may become sharers in the divine beatitude.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Sadly, Saint Basil's understanding of the human person is no longer appreciated in contemporary society. He was writing to a Christian audience in an increasingly Christianized world while our contemporary situation is far from the milieu of Saint Basil. Christian principles have been replaced by a philosophical materialism only concerned with the here and now. A materialist

only believes in what he can see and touch. He lends credence to only those matters which can be demonstrated scientifically. We do not have the time to delve into the historical evolution of materialism and how it became the operating principle of human society. Suffice it to say, it has influenced how we live, what we believe, and how we act toward one another. Unfortunately, it has even influenced our Church, not in a dogmatic fashion but in an experiential sense. We have no hesitation in running to the doctor if we have the slightest ache or pain. However, when we are suffering from a spiritual malady, we hesitate in going to the spiritual hospital, the church. How many of us spend more time fretting over our physical well-being rather than our spiritual health? This is a result of an insidious materialism that we ourselves have thoughtlessly adopted. In this context, it becomes very difficult to speak of illness, disability, or disorder in terms of the Cross and Resurrection. The Beatitudes become nonsensical and the counsels of the holy fathers are relegated to pious thoughts for monks.

Metropolitan Nikolaos (Khadzhinkolai) of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, as a respected academician, monastic and hierarch of the Holy Orthodox Church, offers prescient insights regarding our contemporary situation:

“In the old days, when people fell ill, they used to take oil from the oil lamp of the holy icons and apply it to their body and along with their prayer, they were waiting to be cured. Today, we first think of the doctor, the medicines, the antibiotics.

In the past, people's homes were full of icons, holy water and other holy items. Now, even in the cells of monks you can find medicines, prescriptions and doctors' telephone numbers.

In the older days, in periods of drought, people prayed to God or had a litany to ask for rain; and God always answered back. Their lives were God-dependent. Today, when it is not raining, we seek information through the weather report and the satellites. But satellites do not respond with solutions, instead they disappoint us with explanations. Our lives are man-dependent.

Our hope is directed towards human achievement, which can be terribly impressive regarding its influence on the quality of our material life but is a total failure when it comes to man's happiness. Material prosperity and biological health are accompanied by poverty of principles and spiritual stagnation. Blindly neglecting the causes, we try to improve the outcome. As a result, less and less people are happy. Life ends up being like a chain, every link of which could be called 'success,' but its final name is 'failure.' The inheritance of anxiety and the unprecedented illness of social relationships consist an indisputable characteristic of contemporary societies.

The Church is saying: Let's put God in our life, let's trust in the presence of His love, let's lean our expectations and hopes on Him, and He will respond to everything: our deeper existential quests, our family or health problems, our daily needs.”<sup>iii</sup>

Let us to turn to the Gospel of Saint John, proclaimed on the Fourth Sunday of Pascha, the Sunday of the Paralytic, in order to highlight Metropolitan Nikolaos' message. In this Gospel pericope, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ goes up to Jerusalem and encounters a paralytic who had been suffering from his affliction for 38 years. The first question the Lord Christ asks the paralytic concerns his desire and not his illness. “Do you want to be made well?” The paralytic responds by not answering the question. He responds, “I have no man. . .” Jesus commands him

to “Rise, take up your bed, and walk.” The paralytic does as the Lord commands. The Savior’s parting words to him are instructive for us. “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.”

In his commentary on this Gospel, Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov explains this last sentence.

“This is the commandment the Lord gave to the paralytic whom He healed, as we heard today in the Gospels.

Beloved brethren! This commandment of the Lord has enormous importance for us. It teaches us that we are subjected to sickness and other catastrophes of this earthly life for our sins. When God delivers us from sickness or catastrophe, but we return to a sinful life, we are again consigned to catastrophes that are more onerous than those which were our first punishments sent from God to bring us to our senses.

Sin is the cause of all man’s sorrows, both in time and in eternity. Sorrows are the natural consequence, the natural property of sin, just as sufferings, produced by physical illnesses, are the unavoidable property of these illnesses, and their characteristic effect. Sin in the broad sense of the word could also be called the fall of humankind, or its eternal death, and encompasses all people without exception. Some sins are the sad inheritance of whole human societies. Finally, each person has his own individual passions, his own particular sins he has committed, that belong to him exclusively. Sin, in all these various forms, serves as the beginning of all sorrows and catastrophes to which all mankind is subjected, to which human societies are subjected, and to which each person in particular is subjected.

The state of fallenness, the state of eternal death, by which all mankind is infected and stricken, is the source of all other human sins, both societal and personal. Our widespread sin-poisoned nature has acquired the ability to sin and an inclination toward sin, it has subjected itself to sin, and can neither remove sin from itself, nor do without it in any of its activities. A person who has not been renewed cannot help but sin, although he may not want to sin. (Rom. 7:14–23)

There are three punishments determined by God's righteous judgment upon all mankind for the sins it has committed. Two of them have already happened, and one is yet to happen. The first punishment was eternal death, to which all mankind was subjected at its root — its forefathers — for disobedience to God in paradise. The second punishment was the great flood, which occurred because mankind allowed the flesh to overcome the spirit and lowered itself to the dignity of irrational beings. The final punishment will be the destruction and end of this visible world for apostasy from the Redeemer, for people's ultimate deviation into communion with fallen angels.<sup>iv</sup>

As a scholar whose *nous* and intellect are in proper functioning order, Metropolitan Nikolaos is able to diagnose the contemporary problem concerning our perception of illness, affliction, disability, and suffering. Once these existential facts are excised from the realm of God, they become something to be avoided at all costs. If that is not possible, those so afflicted are to be avoided because they are an uncomfortable reminder that our existence on earth is tenuous at best. Outside the divine purview, illness and disability lead to despair and ultimately nihilism. However, in the proper context of the merciful divine economy, suffering, illness, and affliction take on a real and significant role in our salvation.

In order to properly understand Saint Ignatius' explanation of the Gospel, one must first recognize a difference in eastern and western concepts of sin and suffering. The western concept of sin is inextricably connected to morality. Sin is defined as breaking the law, a moral code of behavior which distinguishes people as either good or bad. This is clearly not the concept from which Saint Ignatius is writing. Rather, the eastern notion of sin and suffering involves not morality but ontology. Sin is understood as a rupture in a relationship. In this instance, it's a rupture in the relationship between man and God, the source of all life and goodness. After the Fall, that relationship was ruptured, and suffering and death entered the world. As long as humans inhabit the earth, suffering and sickness will prevail. That is a consequence of the Fall. However, the bright Resurrection of Christ has overturned all of that. As we joyfully sing throughout the Paschal Season, "Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life." This is precisely why the Lord Jesus asks the paralytic, "Do you want to be made well?" There is a way out for him, for us, and for our suffering brethren. It's not a matter of physical well-being though. Our eternal well-being is infinitely more important and precious than that. That is why Christ's parting words to the healed paralytic are so striking. "See you have been made well. Sin no more; lest a worse thing come upon you."

In His suffering, death, and Resurrection Christ has transformed death as the path to life. What was once a curse has become a blessing and an opportunity for salvation. Saint Nikon of Optina writes, "We should accept every affliction without argument, with the thought of the wise thief that we receive these sorrows justly for our sins, for the cleansing and salvation of our souls. With this attitude every sorrow takes on the quality of sorrow for the Lord's sake and our

personal cross is transformed into the Cross of Christ, and through it we find salvation.”<sup>v</sup> This is the attitude we are to adopt as Orthodox Christians toward our own suffering.

However, it would be a sin to turn away from those who are suffering or appear to be weak. St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, instructs the faithful with an illustration of the human body. All of the parts of the body, he writes, are necessary to one another even if they appear to be weak or unnecessary. “But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, but our representable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” (1 Cor. 12:20-26)

While the difficulties of life that these dear brothers and sisters are presently experiencing may cause them to appear physically, mentally or emotionally weaker than those who do not have the same disability, they are nonetheless a necessary and vital part of the Body of Christ.

As referenced in my introduction, the Gospel proclaimed on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, which is primarily about how we love our neighbor, makes clear that our own judgment will be predicated upon how we treat those suffering among us. Have we attempted to alleviate their suffering by visiting them when they were imprisoned? Did we offer them food when they were hungry or drink when they were thirsty? For the purpose of this paper, we can extend the Gospel

message to those with special needs or disabilities among us. Are we welcoming them and supporting them as brothers and sisters in Christ? Are we increasing their accessibility to the mysteries (sacraments), fellowship and service by removing obstacles from their path? Is our “gentleness evident to all” (Philippians 4:5) through the way we care for and live with those in our parishes and communities who have special needs? “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” (Matt. 25:40)

A pastoral response to those with disabilities and special needs will certainly depend upon the demographics of each parish. There is no single guideline that will fit each parish’s unique circumstances. However, in broad terms, we should be focused first and foremost on the medical principle of “Do No Harm” which in our context involves ensuring that we don’t place obstacles in the way of those seeking an encounter with Christ. Those obstacles may be physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and psychological. Some of this is attitudinal, especially concerning social, emotional and psychological barriers. If we inculcate in our parish communities a welcoming spirit regardless of one’s state in life, other obstacles such as the physical and cognitive obstacles will be recognized and dealt with appropriately.

One of the most immediate obstacles which can be directly addressed are physical barriers and impediments that hinder full participation in parish life. Key areas to consider are the accessibility of entries into the Church, bathroom stalls and sinks, water fountains, and access to the mysteries which may be administered on a raised solea. Without these and other areas of our

facilities being accessible, it can make full participation impossible for our older adults, those with mobility limitations and the developmentally disabled.

In their seminal work Removing Barriers, the contributing authors focus their efforts on how parishes may remove barriers from those who seek Christ in our Orthodox parishes. In the first section of the work, the authors refer to the “5 Stages” of changing attitudes. In a welcoming parish community, there is a movement from one attitude to another until the Christ-like attitude of “co-laborers” is reached.<sup>vi</sup> It would not be a stretch to notice that there is a concurrent movement of spiritual progress described in the Orthodox Christian ascetical tradition known as purification, illumination, and theosis. In this progression, the deeper purification for which one strives, the more that person will see in others the opportunity to see Christ and the inherent corresponding obligations we owe them. The authors note that the parish can move from ignorance of the issue to pity for the individual before moving on to care for that person. Finally, friendship and a co-equal collaboration between the disabled and the community as co-laborers takes hold.<sup>vii</sup>

This attitudinal paradigm is achieved when, in the words of the authors, “Humbly learning the proper language and appropriate behavior is part and parcel of our vocation as children of the living God and disciples of the risen Lord. It involves identifying and increasing the visibility of people with disabilities-those using canes, walkers, wheelchairs or service dogs. The key in relating to people with disabilities is always communion and openness, not mere compassion or pity. The only rules are sincere love and genuine respect. We are called to look at the person and to remember that the disability is only a part of the whole person. Thus, the first and

foremost valuable gift that any community can offer a person with disability is recognition, rather than rejection. Our mission is, in humble cooperation with the Holy Spirit, to render the church as a whole body, a human reflection of Trinitarian communion, an earthly image of the heavenly kingdom.”<sup>viii</sup>

In 2009, the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas published an official statement on those with disabilities. It notes in part, “Yet a person with a disability is not necessarily handicapped except through physical and attitudinal barriers created by others. Handicaps are in fact the barriers that we create for people with disabilities by excluding them socially and physically. There are many persons with disabilities even in our own parishes; nevertheless, our parishes have not reached out sufficiently to adults and children with disabilities in its ministry. Indeed, the reality of disability is often shrouded in silence or shame because the presence of disability challenges basic assumptions and stereotypes. Therefore, it would be useful for us to recall the fundamental theological principles that should guide our pastoral ministry and practical response as we realize our mission as Church to be a welcoming communion. “God shows no partiality.” (Gal. 2:6) “For the Lord does not see as we see; we see the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Sam. 16:7)<sup>ix</sup>

The ‘handicaps’ that we place in front of those with special needs are not only physical barriers, which are often the easiest to remedy, but also relational barriers. How we speak about and speak to those with disabilities of all kinds will either erect barriers or remove them. The Very Reverend Fr. Anthony Yazge, editor of Removing Barriers, advises that we use the word ‘disability’ rather than ‘handicap’ when referring to people with a disability, always seeking to

recognize their humanity and not simply the disability that creates special needs. Additionally, Fr. Anthony encourages all to speak to a person with a disability directly, showing Christ's love and Christian hospitality in our words and actions. Making assumptions about what another person is capable of understanding, hearing or communicating will often lead to offense and alienation of relationship.

The 2009 statement by the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas continues, "No one should be excluded from the manifold aspects of the church's education (whether children, adults, or the elderly) or the community's pastoral ministry (such as visitations and fellowship). There should also be provision in our seminaries for training and informing future clergy regarding aspects of inclusion for people with disabilities. Responding to issues of disability reflects the willingness to respond to the vulnerability of life itself. An inclusive paradigm of ministry is a crucial step in dispelling misconceptions and assumptions regarding disability, while rendering all areas of parish life accessible and possible to persons with disabilities."<sup>x</sup>

We are not advocating here building the heavenly kingdom on earth. Christ the Lord reminded His disciples, "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) However, we are to see Christ in each other and love the other as we would love Christ. We are to take care of the brother or sister Christ puts right in front of us. If we pray for that discernment, we will recognize our brother's need, seek him out and help him. In the other's disability, we will see our own affliction and be humbled by the experience. Our afflictions may vary in type and quality, but they remain afflictions. In this state, we seek to comfort our afflicted brother or sister.

Removing Barriers is also quite helpful in providing the steps in which to accomplish the goal of ministering to those with disabilities. The steps are:

1. Find your Leader
2. Gather Your Team
3. Assess Your Need
4. Develop A Plan
5. Pray
6. Start <sup>xi</sup>

Of course, it should go without saying that no endeavor undertaken should commence without fervent prayer and fasting. “If the Lord does not build the house, they labor in vain that build it.” (Psalm 127) This must also coincide with the blessing of the spiritual father of the parish, the pastor which is the true starting point. No undertaking of such magnitude should be commenced without such a blessing. This is part of the path of true and proper discernment lest we fall prey to spiritual delusion. Once such a blessing is given, the Lord will direct the work by providing those who will assist as well as those who need assistance.

In setting out to accomplish any parish project, there is always the temptation to abandon spiritual principles for those that appear more “reasonable” or “worldly-wise”. The sacred Scriptures are replete with examples of the Lord God choosing leaders that defy human logic. He chose Moses the God-Seer to lead Israel out of the land of Egypt who considered himself to be incapable of this kind of leadership. “Then Moses said to the LORD, “O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.... O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send.” (Ex. 4:10, 13) Those with a secular mind set may not see themselves as fit for this kind of ministry, but they may be the exact person that God has sent for this ministry.

Each parish community will have different needs and challenges. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct a thorough and exhaustive needs assessment. In such an assessment, it is important to consider the special needs and challenges beyond the existing needs of parishioners. A proper needs assessment will take into account the surrounding environs of the parish community. I know of one priest assigned to an inner-city parish whose church was situated within a growing Hispanic community. It wasn't until he noticed this population that he recognized that his parish was not attending to their needs. Immediately, he learned Spanish, gathered interested people around him, and went out to their homes to invite them to his parish. Within a few months, the parish was conducting services in Spanish and eventually, a free medical clinic was established within the community. Many families became parishioners, marriages were blessed, children baptized, and a new group of people encountered Christ for the very first time. None of this would have happened if that priest had not been cognizant of the need within his own boundaries outside of the existing parish structure.

There are a multitude of examples of this type of outreach in the Gospel. Zacchaeus the tax collector became a holy apostle and after the Ascension of the Lord, Saint Zacchaeus accompanied Saint Peter on his travels. Tradition says he became the Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, where he died in peace. The Samaritan woman whom the Lord Christ encountered at Jacob's well became a holy martyr and courageous confessor of the Christian faith. These are just two examples of lives that were transformed because they encountered Christ in circumstances we could describe as "outside the norm" of Christ's teaching and healing ministry. If we take Christ's example in the Gospel to heart, our needs assessment will expand necessarily outside the bounds of those attending church on Sunday.

Additionally, a proper needs assessment will consider the geographic area of the parish, that particular demographic and the particular needs of all those people whether or not they are Orthodox. As Orthodox Christians, we are duty bound to offer all an opportunity to encounter Christ and experience salvation as did Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman.

A significant part of performing a needs assessment is a detailed understanding of individuals' particular needs. Allow me to provide a concrete example. An Orthodox assisted living facility in the United States of America welcomed an elderly man suffering from early onset dementia as well as mobility issues. He had emigrated from Russia with his family when he was a teenager and his family settled in South America during World War II. When he became an adult, he came to the United States and established a successful dental practice. He was active in his parish throughout his adult life and served his parish as a warden in retirement. When he was diagnosed with dementia and experienced difficulty ambulating, his family decided it was time for him to enter the Orthodox elder care facility. Initially, his disorientation and lack of mobility worsened. He would not communicate with staff or visitors in Russian or English, in spite of numerous attempts. However, some of the staff were Spanish speaking and they noticed that he would respond to their conversations in Spanish. Soon thereafter, everyone who was able, communicated with him in Spanish. He began to hold conversations in Spanish and recall events from his time in South America. His physical therapist was able to communicate with him in Spanish and it greatly assisted in his ambulatory ability. He spoke and understood his native Russian and his adopted language English but wanted to communicate in Spanish. He attended the church services held within the elder care facility and those who were able communicated with him in Spanish. It was a surprising but wonderful transformation. This may not have

happened if the staff had not noticed that he was responding to their own conversations in Spanish. However, their sensitivity led to a shift in how they interacted with this gentleman. It also communicated to him that they were concerned for him and desired to forge a meaningful bond with him. Perhaps that is the most important benefit in performing a needs assessment—the desire for a human connection that ultimately points to Christ as the ultimate healer and Savior.

The presence of affliction, disability, and suffering in our midst is a providential reminder to all concerning our need for salvation and a deep, intimate relationship with the triune God Who is always ready to come to our aid. It is precisely in this state that we encounter our salvation. Even as we eagerly venerate the cross on Great and Holy Friday, let us not shy away from the crosses our disabled brothers and sisters carry. Let us embrace them as we embrace the cross of Christ, seeing in them a reflection of our Savior’s love for each and every one of us.

*Thank you to Fr. Anthony Yazge, Fr. Mark Sahady and Fr. George Alberts for their insights and many years of loving ministry to those with special needs in our Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.*

---

<sup>i</sup> World Report on Disability ([https://www.who.int/disabilities/world\\_report/2011/report/en/](https://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/))

<sup>ii</sup> Saint Basil, *Ascetical Works: Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1962), p.207

<sup>iii</sup> Prof. Nikos Kokosalakis, *Religione e Societa*, 15.3.1996;

[http://www.imml.gr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=104:orthodoxy-and-modern-life-interview-by-prof-nikos-kokosalakis-religione-e-societa-15-3-1996&catid=21:2012-01-29-11-12-32](http://www.imml.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=104:orthodoxy-and-modern-life-interview-by-prof-nikos-kokosalakis-religione-e-societa-15-3-1996&catid=21:2012-01-29-11-12-32) 6/8/19

<sup>iv</sup> Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *Homily on the Sunday of the Paralytic. On Divine Punishment* <http://orthochristian.com/35019.html>

<sup>v</sup> Abbot Nikon Vorobiev, *Letters to Spiritual Children* St. John of Kronstadt Press, p. 134

<sup>vi</sup> Very Rev. Anthony Yazge et al., *Removing Barriers-A Step-by-Step Guide to Making Your Parish More Disability-Friendly*, (Van Nuys, CA: Faithtree Resources, 2017) p. 17

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>ix</sup> USA, *Embracing People with Disabilities within the Church*, Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, June 2009.

<sup>x</sup> SCOBA, Pastoral Letter: Disability and Communion

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, p.33