

Autism and the Sacraments

One family's journey to fully initiate their special needs child
into the Catholic faith

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“Did you see that!” I exclaimed to my husband sitting next to me in the pew? But one glance in his direction told me that he had. His face was consumed with the same joy and awe as my own. Our eight year old son, Daniel, who has disabilities in the autistic spectrum, had just received his First Holy Communion. Upon processing back to his pew he searched the congregation in order to catch our eye, and then threw us a big “thumbs up”!

Rarely demonstrative in any way at all, this simple, playful gesture proved he understood that something really extra special had just occurred. And indeed it had. Jesus had come to our

special son. He had reached out to him and said, “I am here for you always.” What a mighty God we serve, that He comes to each one, no matter the insight or intellect!

The first sign that my son was “different” was brought to my attention at his twelve month well-baby check-up. The pediatrician informed me that Daniel was four months developmentally delayed, meaning that there were certain milestones not yet attained that he should have reached four months earlier.

The recommendation for treatment was intensive therapy and I was soon launched into a new world - one that



Daniel with his parents, Holly and Ed Andrade

included endless abbreviations for protocol and diagnosis - terms like PT (physical therapy), OT (occupational therapy), and IEP (individual education plan). I learned to navigate a system that I had not previously known, but would be dependent upon for years to come.

Initially it was believed that Daniel's only problems were physical. We immersed him in his therapy programs and he did make improvements. Yet, my husband and I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was something more going on. Perhaps it was because Daniel had two older siblings whose early years had given us insight into how a child's development ought to progress. Perhaps it was parental instinct. But the two of us spoke frequently of concerns that we were dealing with more than met the eye.

Additional tests and evaluations in his pre-school years eventually lead us to more accurately understand the unique individual that God created our son to be. The official diagnosis we received was "educable mentally handicapped" (EMH) and "sensory integration disorder" (SID), both of which landed Daniel firmly in what is known today as the Autistic Spectrum. A spectrum disorder is one that has symptoms ranging from mild to severe and in the autistic spectrum the level of developmental delay is unique to each individual.

Autism is a complex disability and it is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Both children and adults on the autism spectrum typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication,

social interactions, and leisure or play activities. Learning difficulties can also accompany the disability.

Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies, autism is growing at a startling rate of 10-17 percent per year. At this rate, the Autism Society estimates that the prevalence of autism could reach 4 million Americans in the next decade. It knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries and can affect any family and any child. Although the overall incidence of autism is consistent around the globe, it is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls.

With these kinds of numbers it is difficult for anyone to be untouched by autism. You may not have a direct family member with the disability, but you may know someone in your church or work environment who is affected by its challenges. And, for those of us seeking to live an authentic, faithful Catholic life, the question bears asking, how are we to respond to our brothers and sisters living in the autistic spectrum?

Through the years we have worked hard to surround him with a supportive community and our home parish has been the heart of this effort. We immersed our family (which includes four other children) into parish life. It became a place where Daniel could feel safe and at home. Even in a loving environment, however, there are hurdles to overcome as you seek to fully initiate your autistic child into the Catholic faith.

When Daniel came of age for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion we were aware of the very

supportive and inclusive approach the United States Catholic Bishops had expressed in their pastoral statement *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*. This document is an excellent resource for parents and parishes who are seeking to reach out lovingly and appropriately to members with disabilities.

According to its guidelines, we were confident that Daniel had the level of understanding necessary to receive the sacraments, but we weren't sure at the time how he would be received by our parish religious education program, or if the curriculum would be able to meet his unique needs. We were met with a very loving response. While there was no special program designed for kids with disabilities, we were able to integrate Daniel into the program in whatever way was necessary to meet his needs. I could attend each class with him which enabled me to be sure he was getting the material on a level he could understand and I did more with him at home to further reinforce the teachings.

Another parish hurdle was Daniel's desire to be an altar server. He already had two older siblings who were serving and it was natural for him to be interested in doing it as well. Could he learn all of the responsibilities of this crucial role? Would others be patient with him if he made errors? Would he be a distraction in any way? How would the church respond?

Once again he was greeted with patience and love. He participated in the same training as everyone else and also received additional support and lessons from his experienced older siblings. Daniel does not have mannerisms that

are distracting or annoying so we didn't have to worry about his presence on the altar drawing attention.

One of the beautiful outcomes of his involvement as a server is that the entire altar server community at our parish learned to support him in this role. Sometimes he needs gentle reminders from them about a task he is supposed to be performing, and they all are quite patient and helpful. The experience has been rewarding for him. He is very aware of the important function servers have and he takes it seriously. Most recently he "graduated" to senior server status, which enables him to proudly carry the cross in the procession.

Currently dioceses in at least 31 states offer specialized religious instructions for students suffering from conditions including autism, mental retardation, emotional and learning disabilities and brain injuries. These programs are responding to a need in the same way Jesus did. He was totally inclusive and he directs his followers to be the same.

Even churches that don't have formal programs in place, such as ours, can be beacons of hope for families who long to see their special children fully initiated into the faith that can give them value and purpose. So much of their life is filled with effort and challenge. With determined love, patience, understanding and ingenuity our parishes can become places of refuge along the journey.

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