

## Praise for *Indispensable*

“Perhaps the most joyful Mass I celebrate each year is on Pentecost Sunday, when I am privileged to administer the sacrament of Confirmation to young men and women with a variety of intellectual and developmental disabilities. I am grateful to Mark Bradford and the authors whose essays make up *Indispensable* for their valuable reminder that Jesus instructs us to go and make disciples of all people, and that we need to take that instruction seriously, including for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.”

—**Cardinal Timothy Dolan**, Archbishop of New York

“One of the great blessings of my life as a bishop has been the witness of families who treasure their children with disabilities. Their love reminds the world that human beings, including the weakest and most compromised, are more than creatures of acquisition, consumption, and competition. We have a higher dignity. We were made for love, and the child with a disability is God’s invitation to all of us to become the people of hope and meaning he created us to be. Mark Bradford’s *Indispensable* speaks with uncommon skill and comprehensive detail to the importance of our parishes welcoming the disabled. It’s a marvelous, practical, immensely valuable read.”

—**Archbishop Charles J. Chaput**, OFM Cap., Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia

“Through Baptism, we are called to build a Church where all are invited, welcomed, valued, and included. The Church’s mission is to reflect the inclusive love of Christ and to elevate the nature, dignity, and destiny of each human being as created in the image of God. This significant work by Mark Bradford and contributors is a vital step toward ensuring that those with intellectual and developmental disabilities find not only a place in shared worship but a true sense of integration into communities of faith. It is

a book that offers essential guidance for creating parishes that embrace every member of the Body of Christ, in all its diversity.”

—**Archbishop Peter A. Comensoli**, Archbishop of Melbourne, Australia

“Expand your pastoral appreciation and discover the concrete steps to enhance your parish as a place of belonging for persons with disabilities. These essays raise specific aspects rarely considered for a parish to welcome the gifts of persons with disabilities and uncover their indispensable gift from God.”

—**Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz**, Archbishop Emeritus of Louisville

“As the father of a son with Down syndrome, I read *Indispensable* with a special sense of gratitude. Mark Bradford has edited a terrific, life-affirming book. It deserves the widest possible readership in our parishes.”

—**Francis X. Maier**, Senior Fellow, Catholic Studies, Ethics and Public Policy Center

“Anyone interested in the intersection of Church and disability will benefit from reading *Indispensable*. The experts provide clear information that builds a good foundation for persons who do not have a background in disability or theology. At the same time, many chapters include stories, ideas, and perspectives that will help more experienced readers grow.”

—**Elizabeth Potts**, Associate Director of Diocesan Relations, National Catholic Partnership on Disability

“This insightful collection reminds us that our churches are incomplete without the presence, gifts, friendship, and faith of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Moreover, it equips us to welcome and embrace every member of the Body more faithfully and fully.”

—**Erik Carter**, Luther Sweet Endowed Chair in Disabilities, Baylor University

# Indispensable

A Catholic Guide to Welcoming Persons  
with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

EDITED by MARK BRADFORD  
FOREWORD by BISHOP MICHAEL F. BURBIDGE

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*There are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.*

—1 Corinthians 12:20–22

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# Foreword

Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge  
Bishop of Arlington

It is a privilege and a joy for me to present this volume of essays entitled *Indispensable: A Catholic Guide to Welcoming Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*. It is my hope that the efforts of those who contributed to it will bear much fruit in helping all of us promote the participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church at all levels.

Pope Francis frequently reminded us that no one should be left behind—not in society as a whole and certainly not in the Church. Sadly, in our day and age, there are many individuals who do feel left behind and who think they have no place at the table in our parishes, schools, and faith formation programs due to their physical, emotional, and developmental disabilities. How important it is, then, that our national, diocesan, and parochial ministries be known for the warm welcome and embrace they are called to extend to our brothers and sisters with various disabilities.

At the same time, it is all too easy to think that such persons are only recipients of our pastoral work and care. The truth is that every member of the Church, without distinction, has received the whole of the Gospel and has the joyful task of proclaiming it. We can see this in the lives of people living with disabilities whose eyes light up and who smile when the Holy Name of Jesus is mentioned, or when they show us, either by word or by gesture, their love for God. It is up to us, then, to include these brothers and sisters to the extent possible in our ministries as full

participants and partners, recognizing that, like all of us, they too are beloved children of God called to encounter Jesus, grow in friendship with him, and in their own way bear witness to him.

Yet we cannot do this alone, for as Jesus taught us, we are merely the branches, and he is the true vine (cf. John 15:5). Apart from him, we can do nothing; with him all things are possible. Thus, Jesus asks only that we give him our best efforts, sacrifices, and hard work, and trust that he will use these gifts in miraculous ways to bless, heal, and transform the lives of his beloved, especially our brothers and sisters most in need.

I am pleased, then, that this volume offers a rich variety of expertise, experiences, and best practices aimed at the beautiful goal of including, engaging, and serving individuals with disabilities. I pray that everyone who reads and uses this book in pastoral ministry will continue to treat all persons, no matter their condition of life, with profound respect and love, helping them always to feel fully welcomed and cherished in the Church. That is the way it should be, and with the help of God's grace, that is the way it will be.



# Introduction

Mark Bradford

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that in 2021, one in four American adults were living with some form of disability.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 8.38 million Americans of all ages live with *an intellectual or developmental disability (IDD)*,<sup>2</sup> understood as one who has a significant limitation in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Added to that statistic, the newest report (2022) from the CDC shows that the incidence of autism, a developmental disability that is sometimes accompanied by intellectual disability, continues to increase. One in thirty-six children who are eight years old are now diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.<sup>3</sup> The needs of these individuals affect our society in various ways—in education, health care, and social services—but most importantly for readers of this book, the prevalence of disability in the US challenges the Church to ask how adequately prepared we are to spiritually form and serve the needs of these persons and their families in our parishes.

That notion of forming persons who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) may strike some as odd. Flawed understandings of IDDs linger, and some may question why scarce parish resources should be applied to those who are “going straight to heaven” anyway. This book will disabuse any who read it of that

1. “Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated July 15, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html>.

2. “Prevalence of IDD in the United States,” RISP Data Bytes, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, September 2024, <https://publications.ici.umn.edu/risp/data-bytes/prevalence-of-idd-in-the-us>.

3. “Data and Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 16, 2024, [https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/?CDC\\_AAref\\_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html](https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html).

attitude. Those living with IDD are a very diverse group. Cognitive impairments range from mild to severe, so presuming incapacity is unwise and, frankly, harmful to individuals who are often eager to learn and who make great students. Some may only require small changes in the environment or modifications to a religious education curriculum for them to keep pace with their typical peers. The presumption should always be that catechesis and spiritual formation are for everyone—including those with IDD. After all, these are our brothers and sisters in Christ. To presume they are okay just as they are is to presume they are insensitive to grace or incapable of growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ. To make that presumption would be to deny the divine gift of their Baptism, their human dignity, and their treasured status as a child of God.

Of course, IDD affects families and not just individuals. In many cases, IDD first begins to impact families before the birth of their child. Parish staff must be prepared to counsel families who face increasing pressure to accept prenatal screening during pregnancy, and then the subsequent pressure to abort a “defective” child if they receive a diagnosis. As Tracy Winsor and Bridget Mora tell us in chapter 4, everyone—even Catholics—should be considered vulnerable to the suggestion of abortion and the moral injury that follows from such a horrific decision. In some cases, the Church may be called upon to console a family that experiences perinatal loss and to assist them in preparing for burial. At every stage of life, the Church has an important role to play in welcoming, assisting, and guiding families who need spiritual counsel, the grace and consolation of the sacraments, and support. When the parish is not reaching out, data tells us that families will leave, and once they leave, they may never return.

Statistics show us the impact of a Church that is not welcoming to persons with IDD and their families:<sup>4</sup>

4. See Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Brookes, 2007).

- Only 44 percent of adults with severe disabilities reported attending a place of worship once a month, compared to 57 percent of people without disabilities.
- Fewer than one half of children and young people with autism and other disabilities participated in religious services at any point in the previous year.
- More than one out of three families have changed their place of worship because their children weren't included or welcomed.

You will read these statistics again later in this book. While the data is taken from a broad swath of religious traditions, those who work in Catholic diocesan and parish disability ministry say their experience confirms a similar profile in the Catholic world. These numbers reveal a hard truth: Many of our brothers and sisters with IDD participate in Mass infrequently or not at all. We must ask why. The goal of this collection of essays is to provide practical resources to help those working in parishes, as well as the families of those living with IDD, so that they are better prepared to understand and support the needs of this vulnerable population.

Michelle Baum and Janice Benton have noted that the Catholic response to disability has been undergoing an evolution over the years from ignorance and fear, through compassion and charity, and ultimately to where we are now: toward recognizing and including those living with disabilities in the Church and valuing the various gifts and insights they offer.<sup>5</sup> Until the mid-twentieth century, intellectual disability was largely shrouded in fear and suspicion. While great strides have been made, those fears unfortunately still linger with damaging results in some quarters.

The Catholic Church has always been at the forefront of serving the disabled, and religious orders were largely responsible

5. Michelle N. Baum and Janice L. Benton, "The Evolution and Current Focus of Ministry with Catholics with Disabilities Within the United States," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 10, nos. 1–2 (2006): 39–54.

for providing a safe and supportive place of residence for them when needed. We can recall, in the Middle Ages, Blessed Margaret of Castello (1287–1320), who being severely disabled herself was abandoned by her parents and taken in by Dominican nuns. She became known for her cheerfulness and tireless care of the sick and dying. Later, in the nineteenth century, St. Luigi Guanella (1842–1915) worked to establish homes for homeless children and those with disabilities in Italy. He founded the Servants of Charity and the Daughters of St. Mary of Providence out of groups of young men and women who were inspired by his work and asked to assist him. After visiting the United States in 1912, he sent six Daughters of Charity a year later to work with girls with intellectual disabilities in Chicago. The Communities of Don Guanella and Divine Providence in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia are an enduring legacy to his devotion to the intellectually disabled.

Beginning in the 1960s, when atrocities were discovered in some institutions that had been established to house individuals with disabilities, laws began to change and many of the institutions were closed. Catholic Charities was quick to respond, and in New York City, the agency became the third to receive a grant to develop group homes to accommodate much smaller groups of individuals in residential settings.

Among the first to acknowledge the need for spiritual formation of those with intellectual disabilities was Msgr. Elmer Behrmann, who founded the Department of Special Education in the Archdiocese of St. Louis in 1950. The years following the Second Vatican Council (the late 1960s and the 1970s) saw significant growth in outreach to those living with intellectual disability: the National Apostolate for the Mentally Retarded (eventually renamed as the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry) was founded, as was the Special Religious Development (SPRED) program in Chicago; a master of arts degree in Special Religious Education at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee was also established. These individuals and organizations began to work

creatively to recognize the gifts of those with intellectual disabilities and to acknowledge their need, and capacity, for formation in the faith.

The work of these pioneers in the care of the disabled provided the background for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to publish its first pastoral statement on persons with disabilities in 1978. This statement was a landmark in disability ministry in the Church in the United States. It presented a compelling case for reconsidering how those with disabilities in the Church were to be not only noticed but included. The language of the document moved the conversation from charitable works for those with disabilities to their full inclusion in all aspects of both Church and national life. Charleen Katra, executive director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, has provided an excellent overview of the USCCB's documents on disability ministry in chapter 3 of this book.

The authors whose essays I am privileged to include in this volume have contributed their wisdom and experience to assist you—pastors, parents, and all those who work in disability ministry at any level or who are eager to support it—in continuing this evolution of drawing those with IDD's more fully into the communion of the Church. Official Church documents—and this book too—are a valuable resource for inspiration and suggestions, but unless they are put to use by those working at the grass-roots of the Church's pastoral activity, they are, frankly, impotent in effecting change. We, the contributors of *Indispensable*, hope this book will assist you in welcoming and valuing persons with IDD's in your parishes. No, even more than that: We hope that you will be encouraged to find ways to fully welcome those living with IDD's into the heart of the ministry of your parishes, so that they aren't only the recipients of that welcome but are called upon to welcome others too.

Jesus taught us by way of a parable the importance of welcoming strangers and those with differences into our communities. He

told us that “when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12–14).

I am profoundly grateful to the authors who have contributed to this book. They have given their lives and their careers to freely, lovingly, and generously respond to the needs of those with IDD. Each has offered his or her experience and wisdom to you, to assist all who read this book, in the hope that it might be an inspiration to do the same. In keeping with the variety of backgrounds and perspectives on offer in this collection, I have tried, as much as possible, to honor each author’s distinct approach to how we think and talk about disability. This is a complex and evolving social reality that resists absolute uniformity of style; nevertheless, what all of the writers here have in common is their careful attention to the equal dignity of persons with IDDs, who are no less made in the image and likeness of God than others (see Gen. 1:26).

Our prayer is that this book will inspire deep reflection in parishes so that our churches become true places of welcome and communion. It is our wish that all might be welcomed, honored, loved, and respected as brothers and sisters together in the Body of Christ. But it is not just *our* wish; it is our Lord’s wish. May our sacred banquets be filled with those whom many still choose to reject and exclude from their company. May the Body of Christ fulfill our Lord’s will and become a sign for all of Christ’s love and the fulfillment of his desire for wholeness—a place where all members join together in the feast and together live in the hope of his pledge of future glory.<sup>6</sup>

6. See the antiphon to the Magnificat for the Feast of Corpus Christi, “O Sacrum Convivium,” attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas.

# Wonderfully Made

## Creation, Human Dignity, and the Gift of Vulnerability

*Miguel J. Romero*

### SUMMARY

There is a difference between the way the world thinks about disability and the way Christians think about disability. This chapter introduces readers to a properly Christian and distinctively Catholic approach to thinking theologically about “disability.” Taking inspiration and guidance from the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and the teachings of Pope St. John Paul II, it considers contemporary ways of thinking about disability—and, in particular, our innate vulnerability and dependency—in light of the radical challenge of the Gospel.

\* Earlier versions of this essay were presented as lectures on November 9, 2019, at the Recognizing the Body of Christ Symposium: A Theological Engagement with Disability, sponsored by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability and the Institute for Human Ecology at the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC): “Wonderfully Made: Creation, Human Dignity, and the Gift of Vulnerability” and “Called to Beatitude: Our Wounds, God’s Grace, and the Sacraments of the Church.” An expanded version of section 3 was published in the *Journal of Moral Theology*, vol. 6, special issue 2 (2017), 206–253: “The Goodness and Beauty of Our Fragile Flesh: Moral Theologians and Our Engagement with Disability.”

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- What does it mean to think, speak, and argue theologically about disability?
  - What do Christians believe to be true about every human being?
  - What does the Catholic tradition have to say about the goodness of the body and the gift of vulnerability?
  - How does the Gospel challenge contemporary presumptions about the nature, meaning, and significance of disability?
- 

INTRODUCTION

I want to talk about the distinction between “ability” and “disability.” Specifically, my interest is in the way Catholics think about the various kinds and degrees of bodily difference we recognize within and among the family of humanity. Certainly, the spectrum of differences that stand as the immediate occasion of this essay are typically classified under the heading “disability.” Nevertheless, and without abandoning that animating circumstance, my principal concern is how Catholics think *theologically* about the fact that differences in bodily shape, function, appearance, faculty, capacity, and disposition (whether congenital or acquired) are all an ordinary part of what it means to be a human being. How do we think about these differences with respect to our own bodies and the bodies of others? So, this essay is about Christian theological anthropology, the human body, and the distinctively Catholic approach to theology. To aid the exploration of our guiding question, according to the terms just mentioned, I will draw upon the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas and Pope St. John Paul II.

A point of clarification is important from the outset. When it comes to the various qualities and features that distinguish one



person's body from that of another, a Christian does not need to study theology in order to *see* those differences with the eyes of Christ, to *judge* their significance in light of the Gospel, and to *act* with love, beneficence, kindness, and compassion.<sup>1</sup> In other words, without studying theological anthropology, one can be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and be holy, wise, and virtuous in the way one navigates the various phenomena, experiences, and moral questions typically organized under the heading "disability."

That being said, for Christians who have an interest in the topic of "disability," a theological exploration of the Christian account of the human being is good for at least two reasons. First, following the example of Blessed Mother Mary, it is praiseworthy to contemplate the principles, causes, and reasons relevant to the assurances, convictions, and hopes proper to Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Second, even though a Christian might have been formed (for the most part) to see, to judge, and to act quite faithfully, errors are always possible and puzzling questions will always be found when one seeks to understand anything beyond the typical first impression, intuition, or moral impulse. In other words, theological reflection can help us avoid mistakes and come to recognize things that are invisible to the casual onlooker.

Relative to the larger aims of this collection of essays, the two big "takeaways" of this first chapter concern *what* this book is about and *whom* this book is about. Strictly speaking, the topic of this book is not "disability," and, strictly speaking, this book is not about a special class of persons "out there" called "the disabled." These two takeaways warrant a bit of an explanation, which will be divided into four parts concerning: (1) the work of theology, (2) Christian anthropology, (3) St. Thomas Aquinas on the vulnerability of our bodies, and (4) how the Gospel challenges

1. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* 236, encyclical letter, May 15, 1961, vatican.va.

2. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* 108, encyclical letter, September 14, 1998, vatican.va.

some of our most precious presumptions about the significance of “disability.”

**THE WORK OF THEOLOGY: FAITH SEEKING  
UNDERSTANDING**

I regularly teach an undergraduate theology course called “Disability, Vulnerability, and Human Flourishing.” The course is designed for any student, any major, who has had at least one serious college-level introduction to Christian theology and the Catholic tradition.

I begin the class with two questions: “Who are you? Why are you here?” This may seem like a cliché icebreaker—admittedly, it is indeed unoriginal—however, the answers to these questions are important. The answers are important because there is a direct relationship between the topic of the course (i.e., “disability”) and the reasons inspiring each person’s presence in the room. What is at stake is that we all get on the same page about the particular kind of work, the particular kind of thinking we will be doing over the course of the semester.

So, I ask them: Given the options, why would you sign up for a theology course with the word “disability” in the title? In this day and age, what could possibly motivate a person like you to sign up for a course focused on the way Christians think theologically about disability?

For most of my students, there is a vocational or professional goal motivating their interest, like teaching, ministry, social services, or the medical field. Moreover, virtually every student mentions the circumstances of a family member or friend as part of the bigger picture of their personal interest. What is important, and the reason I ask about their motives, is to encourage them to take note of where they are coming from. This first step of self-awareness is necessary—necessary, that is to say, for students to simply entertain the possibility that there may be a difference

between the conception of “disability” that inspired their interest and the Christian theological approach to the realities that usually get lumped under the heading “disability.” Those differences matter if the goal is to learn how Christians think, speak, and argue *theologically* about the relevant phenomena, experiences, and moral questions.

Every once in a while, I have a student who arrives with theological questions. I remember a particular young woman, some years ago, whom I will call Maria: a faithful Catholic, imaginative in outlook, academically disciplined, and fearless in the respectful exercise of her wry sense of humor. Maria always sat up front, because she could not climb the stairs to get to the rows further back, and she always sat in the corner, so she could quickly leave the room because her daily medication left her in a near-constant state of nausea.

Maria had a condition that eventually results in various degrees of paralysis in the arms and legs, and chronic pain is part of the ordinary course of her condition. As a devout Catholic, the convictions and confidence of her faith were crystal clear. When it was Maria’s turn to answer my unoriginal icebreaker question, she introduced herself and shared her reasons for joining the seminar.

I hope never to forget what Maria said: Although her illness was the circumstance that inspired her interest, the reason she was sitting in our classroom was a list of theological questions she had been collecting for over a year. Maria had developed an impressive understanding of the nuances of her condition, but she wanted to learn how to think about the *reality* of her condition in the light of her faith. She wanted to understand her circumstances and her experience in relation to the faith of the Church. She wanted to know how to investigate and then how to articulate the reasons for her hope. Maria kept me on my toes that semester!

Like St. Anselm, Maria’s faith moved her to seek understanding, which is why she signed up for a theology course with the word “disability” in the title. *Faith seeking understanding*—that is

a good way to think about the work of Christian theology, and it is a good way to think about the exercise of working through the chapters of this book.<sup>3</sup> Allowing for all the individual circumstances and personal interests that led you to take up a collection of essays with “disability” in the title, *faith seeking understanding* is a good way to think about the common purpose animating this collaborative project.

Faith seeking understanding. What does this mean? As St. Paul describes it, faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen (Heb. 11:1, emphasis added). The particular work of Christian theology begins with *specific convictions* and *particular assurances* about what has been revealed by God, in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> These are the truths revealed in Scripture, Tradition, and the teachings of the Church.<sup>5</sup> One can think about those convictions and assurances as the fundamental starting points, the first principles that stimulate, anchor, and define the work of Christian theology, regardless of the topic.

In the case of Maria and the essays of this collection, those convictions and assurances are the fundamental starting points for properly Christian and distinctively Catholic theology—and, for that reason, they are the first principles proper to the task of thinking theologically about the spectrum of bodily conditions and experiences typically classified under the heading “disability.” With that in mind, we can ask: What convictions and assurances of Christian faith are most important to a theological engagement with the various kinds and degrees of bodily difference we recognize within and among the family of humanity? What follows in the next section will be familiar to many readers, but reminders are always good at the beginning of a new study.

3. Francis, *Lumen Fidei* 23–36, encyclical letter, June 29, 2013, vatican.va.

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 150–159.

5. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 10, November 18, 1965, vatican.va. See also *Fides et Ratio* 60.

## THE CHRISTIAN ACCOUNT OF THE HUMAN BEING

The Christian account of the human being is rooted in and stands upon what Christians believe about the *whole story*, the full and complete picture revealed in and through Jesus Christ—the things we see here and now, and the integral truth about the here and now, revealed to humanity in Scripture, Tradition, and the teachings of the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Understood in that way, properly Christian and distinctively Catholic theological reflection on the dignity and destiny of the human being begins with and presumes the absolute goodness, truth, and beauty of the Creator: the Triune God, above all descriptions, who established the marvelous order of the cosmos above the fiery heavens, and who brought everything that is into being out of nothing.<sup>7</sup> The God whom Christians worship is the Lord of creation, the first cause and final end of all things. It may seem odd, at least initially, to begin with the Christian understanding of God. However, the importance of the first claim from the Nicene Creed (“I believe in God. . .”) cannot be overstated—for among the direct entailments of Christian faith in the goodness of God are certainties related to the goodness of creation and the goodness of God’s providential intent for each and every creature. The uncaused and unchanging God of love is the one who creates, intimately sustains, and dignifies fragile creatures like us.

That is where Christian theology begins; if the focus of the theological engagement is creatures like us, then the whole story, the full and complete picture, includes convictions about the kind of beings that we are—convictions about what it means to be a human being. This is what Pope St. John Paul II was talking about in his message at the 2004 International Symposium on the

6. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 11–22, December 7, 1965, [vatican.va](http://vatican.va); Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita* 10–28, April 2, 2024, [vatican.va](http://vatican.va).

7. *Catechism* 325. See also *Catechism* 279–324.

Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person. Specifically, John Paul II reminded his audience and the whole of the Church that “the starting point for every [Christian] reflection on disability” must be “rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology.”<sup>8</sup> These are the things that Christians believe are true about every human being: What are we? Where do we come from? What is our purpose? What is our condition? What is the meaning and significance of our individual lives?

So, what do Christians believe about the human being?<sup>9</sup> We are intellectual creatures formed in the image of God and capable of knowing and loving God.<sup>10</sup> As composite beings, we are one thing: a unity of material and immaterial properties, a living spirit and living flesh, an incorruptible soul that exists in and through a corruptible body as the spiritual principle—the form—of that body.

We are creatures whose incarnate, natural happiness includes the knowledge and love of immaterial truth and goodness, which are alive in the image of our Creator. We are, moreover, creatures that can be elevated by supernatural grace to know and love God, as God knows and loves himself, which is our ultimate happiness. And yet, while capable of being moved toward that lofty destiny, we remain fragile and vulnerable creatures: “a flower quickly fading, a wave tossed in the ocean, a vapor in the wind”<sup>11</sup> (see Ps. 103:13–16).

While we are each capable of knowing and loving God, we are likewise each capable of breaking relationship with the Creator

8. John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person* 2, January 5, 2004, vatican.va.

9. *Catechism* 355–421.

10. This doesn’t mean that the “use of reason” is what makes us human beings. As both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas explain, if the use of reason was the difference that specifies our being, we would cease to be human every time we fell asleep. There is something more basic, more fundamental that distinguishes us from other creatures. Aquinas identifies that fundamental difference as the inalienable aptitude of every human being to know and love God—specifically, the power called “intellect,” which is certainly manifest in the use of reason but is not constituted in the use of reason. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1.93.4, 7; see also 1.76.1; 1.77.1 ad. 7; 1.79.8.

11. “Who Am I,” track 2 on *Casting Crowns*, *Casting Crowns*, Beach Street Records, 2003.