

WESTON SCHOOL

OF THEOLOGY

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Images of Disability— Icons of Beauty

Learning to See the Disabled Person With the Eyes of the Heart

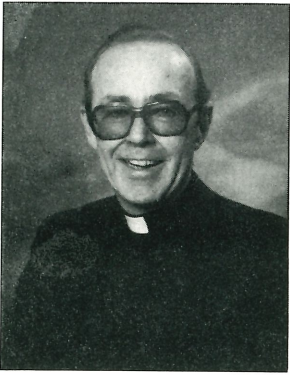
Reverend Thomas J. McDonnell

*Margaret E. Pyne
Professor of Pastoral Studies
Weston School of Theology*



PUBLIC LECTURE
March 5, 1992

REVEREND THOMAS J. MCDONNELL



Weston School of Theology is honored to announce the appointment of Rev. Thomas J. McDonnell, as the second Margaret E. Pyne Professor of Pastoral Studies. Fr. McDonnell, Pastor of St. Augustine's Parish in South Boston, received his doctorate in theology in 1964 from the Gregorian University. For seven years, he co-ordinated Archdiocesan ministries with the disabled, co-founding the Simon of Cyrene Society, Inc., which works on many levels with persons with disabilities. At present, he is a weekly columnist with *The Pilot*,

the Archdiocesan newspaper. He has written over 100 articles on pastoral matters in *The Priest*, *Emmanuel*, *Worship*, *Preaching Today*, and *Pastoral Life*, among others. He has authored one book: *Listening to the Lord in Literature* (Alba).

As the Margaret E. Pyne Professor of Pastoral Studies he is currently offering a course entitled "Concerns of the Disabled: Challenges for the Church."

The Pyne lecture for 1992 is entitled "Images of Disability/Icons of Beauty: Learning to See the Disabled Person with the Eyes of the Heart."

As Proverbs reminds us, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." But so often our vision is limited, distorted or conditioned by pragmatic goals and utilitarian concerns. This type of myopia has influenced both Church and Society. A vision which recognizes not only the gifts of people with disabilities but also their contribution to the continuing dialogue between the All-Holy and humanity is needed. And the aim of this year's Margaret Pyne Lecture is to provide possible starting points for cultivating the needed insights of the "eyes of our hearts."

Professor Pyne, in whose memory this professorship is named, was a lifelong advocate for disabled persons. A former Associate Dean of Special Education at Lesley College, Margaret Pyne had a particular vision of the need to educate theological students about ministry for and with persons with special needs. Through the Endowment Trust established by her estate for this purpose, students at Weston School of Theology and other students of the Boston Theological Institute will be assisted to expand their ministerial formation by pursuing courses and attending public lectures related to these special ministries.

Margaret E. Pyne Memorial Lecture 3/5/92
by Rev. Thomas J McDonnell

Images of Disability—Icons of Beauty
“Learning to see the disabled with the ‘eyes of the heart’”
(Eph 1,13)

There are, as we know, no eyeglasses for the soul. In a way, that is a shame, since for most of us corrective vision is often needed. One need merely think of the constant struggle it is to fight back annoyance and to see the Lord in the hungry alcoholic man or woman whom we encounter on the streets of Boston. The frequently disheveled appearance of a poor person—intertwined with the peculiar odor begotten in poverty—triggers an almost instinctive reaction. We tend to turn away from one who makes Christ present to us: “as long as you did it to one of the least, you did it to me” (Matthew 25,40). And then there is the sight of a person who is disabled.

Society has many ways of looking at a person with disabilities—sometimes even before he or she is born. And few of their looks radiate compassion.

Despite the fact that our former Surgeon General, Dr. C. Edward Koop was a strong critic of the cult of what he termed the “idea of perfection,” too many mothers have shared with me the subtle, and not so subtle pressures to have an abortion when it was discovered through amniocentesis or other technological advances that they were to have a child who was disabled. And if the “prophecy” I heard at a Seminar on Genetic Counseling at Brown University several years ago comes true, this pressure will—because of economic reasons—grow greater. Moreover, in a society which has canonized the therapeutic principle that we are born to be pleased, such an approach appears so logical. And yet....

Christopher Nolan is a young man who has multiple disabilities. Through the encouragement of his parents, his own determination, and the work of those at Dublin’s Remedial Clinic, he eventually won a poetry award over many contestants from all over the British Isles. Later he wrote a book which is more or less his own autobiography. After describing the award-ceremony, he wrote about its conclusion. His mother addressed his thoughts to the gathering:

Now she stood at the podium holding his typewritten words in her hand and read: ‘A brain-damaged baby cannot

ponder why a mother cannot communicate with it, and unless it gains parental love and stimulation it stymies, and thus retardation fulsomely establishes its soul-destroying seabed.'

He continues his reflection:

Conscious of the breathtaking sacrifice involved in what his family did for him, yet he detected where destiny beckoned. The future for babies like him never looked more promising, but now society frowned upon giving spastic babies a right to life. Now they threatened to abort babies like him, to detect in advance their handicapped state, to burrow through the womb and label them for death, to baffle their mothers with fear of their coming and yet, the spastic baby would ever be the soul which would never kill, maim, creed falsehood or hate brotherhood. Why then does society fear the crippled child—and why does it hail the able-bodied child and crow over what may in time become a potential executioner?

Peter Singer and Michael Tooley are two well-known Australian philosophers whose views are slowly being absorbed into our own cultural atmosphere. At the beginning of the International Year of the Disabled, the Vatican declared:

...that the disabled person (whether the disability be the result of a congenital handicap, chronic illness or accident, or from mental or physical deficiency, and whatever the severity of the disability) is fully a human subject (a person) with the corresponding innate, sacred and inviolable rights.

To this, the above-mentioned scholars simply respond: "Not true." Without detailing their functionalist and the burden-calculus arguments which lead to their conclusions, I believe we must see how they view disabled children. Both advocate active infanticide as the most human and least costly solution to the care of the "unwanted" handicapped newborns. Quite simply, society and parents should not be burdened with an unwanted, unproductive human being. Here we are not talking about non-treatment—but direct infanticide. If the parents are physiologically capable of conceiving a more "perfect" child, Singer argues as follows:

When the death of a defective infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the defective infant is

killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore, if killing the hemophiliac (or Down's Syndrome child) has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him.

Tooley agrees. And adds the following:

Since I do not believe that human infants are persons, but only potential persons, and since I think that the destruction of potential persons is a morally neutral action, the correct conclusion seems to me to be that infanticide is in itself morally acceptable.

Oscar Wilde, with poetic genius, observed that we can "kill" with looks or with words. And the incidences of staring at the deformities of the disabled—the looks of embarrassment—and of words spoken of intelligent men and women as if they were mentally disabled—incidences shared with me—are as countless as they are depressing. And the poet also wrote:

This too I know—and even it were
If each could know the same—
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.

Thank God, we have gone beyond the time when we warehoused the disabled in out-of-the-way institutions, on the principle of "out of sight, out of mind." But the trained eye can see a type of inverse incarceration—in the sense that walls and steps in many buildings and Churches keep the disabled out. Their structure is still made up of bricks of shame. In a way, we have never quite understood the meaning of Robert Frost's observation:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall...
Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out.

Such isolation from the community, especially the Christian community, maims the spirit. (In my own mind, there is no doubt that the disabled community needs friends like those in the gospel of Mark (chapter 2) who courageously worked to provide accessibility to Christ for

the paralytic. Indeed, in the light of Canon 208, which reads: "Flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ's faithful"—not to work for such accessibility is a sin of culpable omission.)

Thus far, ours has been a brief portrait of what we termed "images of disability." It does not paint in depth the images of hurt, anger and frustration which are also intertwined in the lives of so many persons with disabilities. Because pictures do not talk, we have not been able to include the discouraging statements of "hating my body." And we have not been able to capture the collapse of self-image which affects so many people with disabilities, because too many in our world, thinking in utilitarian terms, have forced them to wonder about their role in and contribution to society.

In our way of thinking, at a very unconscious level, our identity is tied up with our work. Generally after introductions, the question soon arises: "What do you do?" But many persons with disabilities are discriminated against in the workplace. And the most overlooked part of our social teaching—at least in my mind—are the following words of Pope John-Paul II regarding work: Specifically speaking of disabled persons, he writes:

they too are fully human subjects with corresponding innate, sacred and inviolable rights, and, in spite of the limitations and sufferings affecting their bodies and faculties, they point up more clearly the dignity and greatness of man. Since disabled people are subjects with all their rights, they should be helped to participate in the life of society in all its aspects and at all the levels accessible to their capacities. The disabled person is one of us and participates fully in the same humanity that we possess. It would be radically unworthy of man, and a denial of our common humanity, to admit to the life of the community, and thus admit to work, only those who are fully functional. To do so would be to practice a serious form of discrimination, that of the strong and healthy against the weak and sick. Work in the objective sense should be subordinated, in this circumstance too, to the dignity of man, to the subject of work and not to economic advantage.

At first glance, the images we have portrayed seem to lack, on a natural level, what we usually term "beauty." Martha Cleveland, a woman with various disabilities, in her book *Living Well*, writes:

We...honor beauty and reject imperfection. We have beauty pageants and may pretend that a contestant's talents matter in judging. But most of us believe that what wins is the perfect face, the shiny hair, the slender legs, and the sexy body in a bathing suit. Our television personalities and politicians—people who help shape the way we view our world—may be painted, coiffed, sprayed and color-coded to one-dimensional perfection. It's easy for us to blame advertising and the media, but they only offer us what we may want so badly: physical and mental perfection....

And what about those of us who are not perfect, who don't glow with health and beauty, who are in some way different?...A child unlucky enough to be born with a physical or mental differentness is taught while still very young to hide or disguise his difference—and as he learns this, he also learns to be ashamed of himself.

Those of us who develop chronic illness or disabilities later in life have also learned these lessons. All our lives we have been taught not to stare, or that we should ignore another's difference. So when we become affected, we feel as though we are joining a group of people who are somehow undesirable and outside the normal boundaries of society. We become defined by our wound, our illness or disability, and many of us come to believe that definition. We use up our emotional energies in our struggle to prove ourselves to others, to pass, or pretend, or in some other way to be just like everyone else. In this struggle to hide or reject our differentness, we forget that it is part of us and that if we reject it, we end up rejecting our total self.

One usually does not think of a person in terms of being "defined by our wounds." But it is precisely in this context that the beauty of the person with disabilities begins to be grasped by the "eyes of the heart." St. Exupery's *Little Prince* said it well: "What is essential is invisible to the eye. It is only with the heart that one sees rightly." Perhaps there is a deeper definition of "beauty" yet to be articulated. There seems to be a great deal of truth in Ernest Roise's observation (*The Psycho-biology of Mind-Body Healing*):

Our wound is the place where our soul finds entry into us. The calamity that strikes may be our call to spiritual fulfillment.

I believe St. Augustine's observation leads us even more deeply into the source of redemptive beauty to be seen in the wounds of the disabled. He wrote (Sermons 44,6.6):

The deformity of Christ forms you. If he had not willed to be deformed, you would not have recovered the form you had lost. Therefore he was deformed when he hung on the cross. But his deformity is our comeliness. In this life, therefore, let us hold fast to the deformed Christ.

In the Saint's mind, true redemptive beauty is to be found in the Cross—and in those who share intimately with the "deformed Christ." From this perspective, one might truly see in the person with disabilities an icon of beauty. And whatever spirituality we attach to the use of icons, I believe that they are to be seen as a means to lead us ever more deeply into Mystery. And they are seen to be interconnected with the triad of the Beautiful, the True and the Good. And our reflection upon persons with disabilities must also lead us into these areas.

In our pursuit of Truth, we often forget Pascal's observation that "the heart has its reasons." In his mind, as well as in Julian of Norwich's and St. Bonaventure's, we must not always look to Christ the Teacher. Sometimes we must speak heart to Heart. And in our dialogue, truth—sometimes indistinctly—emerges. The following are simply glimpses of truth which I believe must be pursued by greater minds than my own. I believe with William Blake that the best any one person can attain are only fragments and pieces of the Truth.

As we glibly confess that God is our Creator, we must stop and ask ourselves: how do people born with disabilities fit in? Are they accidents? Or are they truly part of God's redemptive plan?

"Yahweh, what variety you have created,
arranging everything so wisely!...
You give breath, fresh life begins,
You keep renewing the world. Ps 104 vs 24 and 30.

The operative phrase is "arranging everything so wisely"—not according to our liking or our manner of reasoning. Other texts could be added, e.g. "Does misfortune come to a city if Yahweh has not sent it?"

Amos 3,5, which lead us—from the idea of God as Creator—to realize not only are people with disabilities part of God's plan, but also the recipients of His infinite, affectionate love. In our achievement-oriented society, this is an important truth to reflect upon. And in our therapeutic and utilitarian society, it reminds us that life, any life, is a gift—a precious gift, unconditionally and irrespective of any achievement.

"I have called you by name and you are mine;
You are precious in my sight" Isaiah 48.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins caught up this insight in his poem "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-males all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finches wings;
Landscape plotted and pierced—fold, fallow and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim;

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change;

Praise him.

Whether one be swift or slow physically or intellectually; whether one's disposition be sweet or sour; whether one dazzles one's contemporaries with brilliance or appears slow-witted, "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change."

And part of the beauty of the disabled person is the fact that they bring gifts to the world. Consciously or unconsciously, those with disabilities en flesh the Cross and its redemptive power. In the first case, ours is the task to reverence its presence, recognizing that all of us, imperfect as we are, will often bear our cross badly. Marguerite-Marie, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's sister, reflected upon her own illness. Thus she wrote:

Lord, the journey comes to a close, giving me, as others, the impression of a complete failure. I have done nothing for you; no conscious prayers, no acts of charity, nor the least work.... I have not even conquered these child-like tempers and the

spiteful beasts which too often take your place in the "No Man's Land" of my sensibility. In vain I promise to do better....

But she resolves to continue to accept her crosses. For, 'we, his children, ought to continue in our own poor way the redemption of the world.'

On another level, ours is the task to lead the believing person afflicted with disabilities, as well as all believers, to see that the way of salvation, the unalterable fullness of life, is still found mysteriously in the way of sorrow taken by Christ during his earthly life: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4,16-17).

Even in the case of the non-believer, I believe the "eyes of our heart" should recognize the presence of the divine and reverence it, because of Christ's mystical, but real, identification with the suffering and because one who sees Christ sees the Father.

But abstract constructs must never overlook the pain and frustration which leads the individual to echo Paul's sentiments of "despairing of life itself" (2 Cor 1,8). At such times, theological constructs are useless. Harold "Laddie" Holt, a person born with C.P. and who communicates through his typewriter, wrote

"But somewhere, yes, there is a line
Which not a word can cross,
A shallowness of language
Where adequacy is lost.

And here, there opens us a void
Between the thought and word,
The deepness of a meaning
Which can never quite be heard."

At these moments, people do not need the words of our wisdom. They need friends—true friends. In her journals, Raissa Maritain wrote: "In these terrible sufferings, I am able to be sustained somewhat by the processes of tenderness and friendship. Indeed, no fine reasoning could have the same effect. This explains the complaints of Job against his friends who reasoned, however, perfectly well." Since I will be reflecting upon friendship as a final point, I would simply emphasize the power of the presence of a friend in such moments.

No friend of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche noted with dismay "the gruesome superlative that stuck classical taste in the paradoxical formula 'god on the cross'. Never yet and nowhere has there been an equal boldness in inversion, anything as horrible, questioning and questionable as this formula: it promised a re-valuation of all the values of antiquity." (Beyond Good and Evil). We might add that the Cross also demands a re-valuation of the values of today both in society and in the Church.

Linking the beauty found in the disabled with our pursuit of truth, we might try to answer the question of the Lord: "Who do you say I am?" Paradoxically, in the context of the experience of the disabled, we find our answer in Luke 2:12: "This is your sign; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Here we find "powerlessness" (child), "helplessness" (swaddling clothes) and "poverty" (manger). All of these ideas have something to say to all of us as followers of Christ and the direction our discipleship should be taking. They remind us—on a personal level—of our essential poverty before God and our utter dependency upon Him. And they challenge us to reach out with all our energy, strength and resources to those who are helpless, powerless and oppressed by poverty. It is in those persons where Christ is to be found.

St. Thomas Aquinas (II-II,188) observes that there is a "sacramental quality" in our activities done in solidarity with the poor and helpless person. But so often, this dimension is overlooked. For example, when one generally interprets the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Christ-figure is associated with the Good Samaritan. And such is indeed correct, since the Lord's life is summed up in the Acts of the Apostles as "going about doing good" (Acts 3). But on a deeper level, is not—in the light of Matthew 25—the real Christ-figure to be found in the helpless, poor, beaten man by the side of the road.

And in this latter context, we can decode the "sacramental" nature of our outreach, precisely insofar as the poor, helpless or suffering person makes Christ real to me. He or she—when I touch them—confers a blessing upon me by making the Lord present to me.

Reflecting upon my own experience, I have often wondered why the many insights into the Church have still not brought about a change in the architectural and attitudinal barriers which still seem to isolate the disabled from the Church community. Even the concept of "servanthood"

often begets an unconscious attitude of "us" and "them." And in the context of "the good"—the good of the Church and of the disabled—I would like to elaborate upon the model of the Church as a community of friends.

At the Last Supper, Jesus called His followers "friends" (Jo. 15,15). Among the ancients, friendship was considered, according to C. S. Lewis, "the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue." Moreover, there are those who maintain that true community can only be conceived in terms of friendship. Thus Professor Macmurray (Persons in Relations) observes:

"A community is for the sake of friendship and presupposes love."

"A community, however, is a unity of persons as persons. It cannot be defined in functional terms, by relations to a common purpose. It is not organic in structure, and cannot be constituted or maintained by organization, but only by the motives which sustain the personal relations of its members. It is constituted and maintained by a mutual affection."

For the sake of brevity, we will merely highlight some of Aquinas' observations on friendship which may help us bridge the barriers which separate so many of the disabled from the Christian community.

In friendship, he remarks, "the lover is related to the beloved—as to her or his very self" (Summa 1-2,9. 28, a.1), and sees the beloved as "another self" (Summa 1-2,9. 28, a.1c). And this love is an energizing love. Through the unity of friendship, the true friend shares the joys and sorrows of the other. "Afflicted with sorrow at the distress of another as though it were his or her own," the friend "seeks to dispel the other's distress as if it were his or her own."

A modern commentator, Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving* stated that there are 4 signs to test whether we are loving persons:

1. Radical concern for another;
2. Deep respect—to see the uniqueness of others;
3. A recognition of a responsibility to the other and a response to his or her implicit needs;
4. There can be no love without an intrinsic knowledge of the other—a sharing on the deepest level.

In our "community of friends" I would emphasize the last point. We cannot attempt to respond to any disabled person or to the disabled

community without taking the time to see how they view the world and the Church. Conversely, we must share our feelings with them. Our New England neighbor Robert Frost reminds us ("Revelation"):

We make ourselves a place apart
Behind light words that tease and flout,
But oh, the agitated heart
Till someone really finds us out.

The application to the disabled community is obvious. We must strive to feel their hearts and—when in our power—remedy those attitudes and barriers which prevent their full integration into our community.

I would add to Aquinas' observations on friendship two other characteristics. Friends accept one another as they are. The emphasis here should center about the openness which should be ours when we encounter not only the person with disabilities, but any of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. It would, in my mind, lead to a greater toleration of the ambiguity and weakness which we all possess. We must never forget that Jesus looked with love upon the rich young man, and respected his choice not to sell all he had and to follow the Lord.

Finally, friendship is consummated by the exchanging of gifts. And we must look at the gifts which the person with disabilities can give the Church: we have mentioned the Cross. But there are so many other gifts—gifts of the heart, the capacity to live for the present moment, qualities of openness, simplicity, etc.

Jean Vanier once noted:

More and more the world seems to be dividing itself into two. On the one hand, there are those motivated by the accumulation of riches, by the need to possess, and by the need to dominate and be above others. On the other hand, there are those who live in involuntary poverty and misery and who are in some way marginal to society, (the aged, the handicapped of all kinds, the alcoholics, the mentally ill, and so forth, and those who live in misery in developing countries). Is not the great challenge of the day to create communities which by their joy and simplicity of life draw the "rich" towards a life of greater simplicity and self-gift, and that draw the miserable towards a new hope?

I believe the Church is called to this challenge. And I believe as we continue to reflect upon what it means to be friends in Christ, we can begin to build this bridge.

This talk has been long and covered many points. So I will conclude with an observation and two hopes. In one of the most memorable and saddest passages of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine remarked: "Too late have I loved Thee, Thou Beauty ever ancient, ever new, too late have I come to love Thee." My hope is that future historians will not look upon our age as one which failed to see the "Beauty, ever ancient, ever new" radiating in the lives of the disabled, the poor and the powerless.

In the play *The Miracle Worker*, the story of Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller, two themes are present. The first is that growth demands hope in the possibility of life. The second is the power of affirmation. My second hope is that the Church will provide the hope in the possibility of a more self-fulfilled life for the disabled community and will learn at every level to be a true instrument of affirmation.