



# Disability Colloquium - Disability and Theology

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The Catholic Theology in Practice Network hosted a colloquium at the University of Roehampton in April 2023 to discuss disability theology and share experiences from different people who have experienced disability (or people with disabilities/PwD) and their spirituality. Here's a brief summary of the topics that resonated with me, offering food for thought for SJOG colleagues, considering that our disability services are a significant part of what we do.

In Christianity, there are various interpretations of how disability is viewed, as well as what the Bible says about people experiencing disabilities. The speakers at the colloquium have delved into this complex field, questioning the practices, and taking action to make religion accessible to everyone.

A central theme in the conversation is the distinction between mere inclusion and a genuine sense of belonging. It raises a vital question about how society is genuinely aiding PwD to participate in everyday activities and truly feel like they belong. The reality is that there is still much work to be done in this regard. Spirituality and religion have shown a positive impact on PwD by connecting them to spaces and people that make them feel welcome.

For example, the Catholic Church in Italy has made significant efforts to make places of worship accessible to everyone. Sister Veronica Armata Donatello, who presented at the colloquium, has been coordinating the Catechesis of people with disabilities of CEI National Catechistic, with the aim of overcoming outdated stereotypes and beliefs and embracing the inclusion of disabled persons.

Although architectural barriers have been removed to promote inclusion, the efforts from the Church alone are not enough. Communities should go beyond this, ensuring that PwD can access different spaces where they feel they belong. Sister Veronica pointed out: "All forms of support are welcome, and the elimination of architectural barriers is important, but without a change of perspective, it will remain a top-down approach." For instance, we need to consider how PwD can participate in leadership roles or have different vocations within the Church and their communities.

This leads to another aspect of disability and Christianity that emerged: the disconnect between teaching and the practice of theology. Cristina Gangemi, one of the presenters, talked about how certain interpretations of the Bible marginalised people with disabilities. However, in reality, the teachings of theology describe what a person is in the image of God. As an example, she introduced the Varnier's mold, a philosophy that views people with disabilities as teachers, rather than burdens for families. Disabled individuals are not distant; they are an integral part of the People of God. Treating them as special doesn't aid their inclusion; instead, it further marginalises them.

The use of labels is linked to this marginalisation, as it can be limiting for a PwD. Progress has been made over time, considering that long ago, imperfections were attributed to relations with the devil or witchcraft, and physical integrity was seen as a sign of the rectitude of the soul. Nowadays, the language has changed, and we've moved away from describing PwD as 'handicapped' or 'unhappy.' The idea of the human person in its entirety manages to shine through, although not without challenges. "Nobody can be identified solely by their limits or disabilities; being a person is what we share as Christians," said Sister Veronica.

At SJOG, we strive to be mindful of the vocabulary we use to refer to all the people we support in different services. However, it's essential to reflect on how the use of labels affects the inclusion of people, especially considering the limited awareness and knowledge about disabilities outside particular contexts like SJOG or places of worship, as mentioned earlier.

Finally, attending the colloquium reminded me that the spectrum of disabilities is vast, with various levels at which they present themselves in different people. I had the chance to chat with some of the attendees who have experienced disability, and they expressed frustration about the general understanding of disabilities, which can be quite narrow. There is a need for increased awareness and advocacy for all types of disabilities. For example, some of the PwD at the colloquium felt that autism received the most attention in policies.

This presents an opportunity to create more spaces for dialogue, both in spiritual practices and everyday contexts, to help build a sense of belonging and better understand the real needs of PwD and how they want to participate in society.