



The Person with Mental Illness

Rev. Richard Gill, L.C., wrote a paper, *The Person with Mental Illness: Bearing God's Image* (2007), for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pro Life office. In it Father Gill quotes from Pope John Paul II's address to health care workers in 1996: "whoever suffers from mental illness 'always' bears God's image and likeness in themselves, as does every human being." Because of the stereotypes and stigma still attached to mental illness in today's secular society, people with mental illness are seen as undignified or with flawed moral character.

Those affected by mental illness include people who live with a diagnosable mental disorder and their loved ones who provide care for them. Mental illness is the leading cause of disability for ages 15-44 in the United States.

Rev. Gill points to the cultural trends toward materialism and violence as contributing factors to the causes of mental illness. Our Christian response is to change human values being defined in terms of a "culture of having" to a "culture of being". We must affirm all persons' dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God, and to recognize their value to the community.

Ways to create a pro-life culture for persons living with mental illness:
(adapted from Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan's address at World Day of the Sick, 2006)

- ❖ Promote the dignity of persons with mental illness.
- ❖ Welcome all persons with disabilities into the parish community.
- ❖ Share the Word of God with persons with mental illness.
- ❖ Assure that the sacraments are available to people with mental illness.
- ❖ Foster the healthy development of children, including their mental functioning.
- ❖ In educational settings, provide solid moral foundation to help young people form lifelong values and virtues.

For the complete publication, *The Person with Mental Illness: Bearing God's Image*, go to <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/r/p/Gill.pdf>.

For more resources on mental illness with faith communities go to:
The Council on Mental Illness, National Catholic Partnership on Disability,
<http://www.ncpd.org/CouncilOnMentalIllness.htm>

Faith Net, National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org. (Type "faith net" in the website's search box.)

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For more information on welcoming persons with disabilities in your parish, contact Sharon Urbaniak, Diocesan Disabilities Action Team, Diocese of Buffalo, 716-847-5514 or surbaniak@buffalodiocese.org

