

Making room: Catholics with disabilities hope synod will hear their voices

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – The Gospel of St. John tells the story of Jesus' encounter with a man who was born blind. Upon seeing him, the disciples asked Jesus if the man's blindness was due to his sins or that of his parents.

"Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him," Jesus replied before healing the man.

One could dismiss the disciples' query as a reflection of the beliefs of a bygone era. But Luz Elena Bracamonte Zamora, a member of the Deaf Catholic Youth Initiative for the Americas, knows those beliefs are still prevalent today.

"In the world, especially in Latin America, there is this ideology that still exists that says we (persons with disabilities) are punished, that we are sick, that we have been bewitched," she told Catholic News Service Sept. 22. But "we are normal people and come from normal families."

Bracamonte joined other people with disabilities at a two-day synodal listening session at the Vatican sponsored by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life.

A report of the listening session, which highlighted both the needs of disabled people and their contributions to the life of the Church, was presented to Pope Francis Sept. 21 after his weekly general audience.

According to the dicastery, the text also was "delivered to the general secretariat of the synod" to ensure that "for the first time, the voice of the faithful with disabilities

reaches the synod fathers.”

The listening sessions took place as bishops’ conferences around the world published their reports synthesizing the 10-month synodal process in dioceses. With the release of those reports, a team of 25 people from around the world began 10 days of work and reflection in Frascati, Italy, Sept. 21 to draft the document for the continental stage of the synodal process.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released its report Sept. 19, summarizing the concerns, hopes and desires of an estimated 700,000 participants who joined thousands of listening sessions and other events during the diocesan phase in the lead-up to the Synod of Bishops on synodality in October 2023.

Among the concerns brought up by U.S. Catholics, the report stated, was the “wound of marginalization” that exists in the Church experienced by groups “who are made vulnerable by their lack of social and/or economic power,” including “people who have disabilities or mental health issues.”

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales released its report in July and said Catholic disabled persons in the country “have called on this synod for attention to be given to their needs.”

“They want to participate more in the life of the Church. This might mean introducing or making use of particular facilities and technologies, but the predominant voice asks that the people of God listen to their experience,” the report stated.

Bracamonte told CNS that some in the Church believe disabled persons “cannot live the sacraments or understand them.” Addressing the pastoral needs of those with disabilities, she added, should be included in priestly formation.

Speaking to journalists at the Vatican press office Sept. 21,

Schonstatt Father Alexandre Awi Mello, secretary of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, said he was moved “by the testimony of faith of these people with disabilities who are often not taken into consideration.”

“At times, there is an association made with intellectual disability and disability in general, as if people with intellectual disability don’t understand about life, about God or about other things,” Father Awi Mello said.

But “to hear them talk about God, about their own encounter with Jesus, is something that moves me deeply,” he said. “It was the first time I had this opportunity, and I hope that the Church also has this opportunity” to listen to them.

Jesuit Father Justin Glyn, who serves as general counsel of the Jesuits’ Australian province and is legally blind, said the listening sessions were a “spirit-filled experience” and that the report delivered to the pope and the Synod of Bishops “hopefully has the potential to be a groundbreaker within the Church itself.”

The insights of people with disabilities, he said, “have often been pretty low on the radar of people who don’t see themselves as having a disability.”

“I think the most pressing pastoral need really is the mindset that sees people as being equal participants in the Church rather than objects of charity,” Father Glyn told CNS.

Disabled persons, he added, often face issues such as “the denial of Communion to people with intellectual disabilities, the physical lack of access to many Church facilities, discrimination in formation and other issues.”

Like Bracamonte, Father Glyn said he also experienced “subtle discrimination” in the Church and recalled being told, “If you had prayed more, you would have been healed” from blindness.

“I think we tend to misconstrue disability, because disability is one instance of limitation. We are all limited,” Father Glyn said.

Catholics need to change their mindset and start seeing “people who have disabilities merely like everyone else: limited people,” he said.