



Becoming a More Welcoming Parish Community

by Deacon Brian McNulty, Chaplain, Rochester Psychiatric Center

As many of you have experienced, there are people in our congregations who are living with a mental illness. It may be the individual, a family member or a close friend. It is estimated that anywhere from 1 in 4 to 1 in 5 Americans are directly involved in mental health issues.

This group of people is not suddenly bursting in our parishes - they have always been here. However, with changes in social policy and a more open society, we may notice a person with some form of mental illness more frequently in our meetings, Liturgies and social gatherings. Some may not feel adequate or comfortable with these encounters. Here are a few starter suggestions on what a community can do to be welcoming and inclusive:

1. Don't be afraid. Mental Health issues are not contagious. You cannot catch it from contact with people. Listen in a non-judgmental way.
2. Parish staff should meet together alone, or with a person experienced in the field, to explore their own conception, prejudice, and contact with Mental Illness.
3. The Greeters and Ushers should meet together with the same agenda and to identify potential situations and to make a specific plan of how to handle what appears to be a disruptive behavior.
4. Be aware, not every person who looks different, dresses differently, speaks or acts differently from our norm is mentally ill. Perhaps identify one or two people on the staff or in the community already who can discreetly build a relationship with a person you do not know and are looking for ways to be more in contact with. There are already people in your congregation who are psychologists, mental health nurses, doctors, and other Mental Health professionals who may be willing to undertake this ministry.
5. Contact the local National Association of Mentally Ill (NAMI) and explore the possibility of a presentation from their Peer Advocacy group.
6. Create an atmosphere where it's safe to talk about mental illness by offering an education program geared to adults and teens on spirituality and mental illness or a forum on types of mental illness, symptoms, medications, treatment and recovery led by professionals in the field.

A person with Mental Health concerns wants to be in contact, with themselves, with others and with the Divine. You as pastoral staff and a whole community can help or hinder that contact by your approach. Remember all people are made in the image and likeness of God. As you find the Christ in them, you will be Christ with them. This is the soul of communion.

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