

'We have the opportunity to experience God's love in an autistic way'

When Rev. Matthew Schneider was asked to move on after just one year of a three-year assignment as a school chaplain and youth ministry leader in Calgary, he was shocked.

"I wasn't expecting it," said Schneider, who was born and raised in Calgary but has since joined the Legionaries of Christ, an international religious community in the U.S.

"I knew it was a new role and I had made some mistakes, but I figured, well there's a learning curve, and almost anybody's going to make a few mistakes given a new role like that."

But his superiors believed the assignment was not a good fit for him. They cited struggles with social communications as a reason for their decision.

While the experience was frustrating for Schneider at the time, today he looks back on that moment as a blessing, because it eventually led him to be diagnosed with autism, a diagnosis that helped him better understand himself, and ultimately, to find roles in ministries that were better suited to him.

In a video released April 2, World Autism Awareness Day, Schneider decided to go public with his autism diagnosis.

"I realize the need to evangelize this segment of the population," he said in the video. "We're about 1.5 to two per cent of the population. We have a much higher chance of being atheists, a much lower chance of attending religious services on a weekly basis...we need someone to reach out to that community, to inculturate the Gospel to the autistic mind."

Schneider spoke with Catholic News Agency about his life at the intersection of autism and the Catholic priesthood, and his hope of bringing the Catholic faith to more people who share the diagnosis.

Like many people in the autistic community, Schneider has a sharp memory and a good mind for facts. He tends to be a concrete thinker, writer, and preacher. He describes himself as "intellectually driven" and he has always been a good student. He prefers to be called an "autistic person" or simply "an autistic" rather than a "person with autism."

Unlike many of his autistic peers, however, faith plays a prominent role in Schneider's life. Studies suggest that people with autism are less likely to believe in God and attend weekly religious services than those without autism.

Schneider said his faith is not just one aspect of his life, but is central to the way he views himself.

“Our Catholic faith affects all of what we are, and really we are called to incorporate our Catholic faith in every aspect (of life). I’m somebody who struggles in this area or that area. But I can, through my relationship with Jesus, overcome those struggles, (and) reach a deeper level of understanding. We can have Jesus and have the faith enter in and help us...to live with those difficulties that come from autism in our lives, to have a greater degree of peace.”

Although Schneider exhibited signs of autism as a child, the diagnostic criteria were different in the 1980s than they are today. It was not until January 2016 – a little more than two years after being ordained a priest of the Legionaries of Christ – that he received an autism diagnosis.

“Autism is primarily a distinction in a way of thinking, a neurological difference,” he said.

Autism presents challenges, including difficulty with picking up on subtle, non-verbal cues. For the priest, this means putting in extra effort when going into social situations.

“Realizing that I’m going to have these difficulties, I will try to put in as much effort as I can, even if that tires me,” Schneider said. “And sometimes I will second-guess: Ok, I might not have picked up the best on that.”

Ultimately, he said, he tries to keep in mind, “Ok, I’m not necessarily going to pick up every social cue, so I’m going to do the best I can and ask for clarification when I’m not sure.”

“There’s (no) magic bullet, and there’s not a time that I’m not autistic, that I can just understand perfectly those social cues. I can put effort into understanding them better, but it’s not going to be the exact same as non-autistic people would probably understand them.”

But there are also blessings to life with autism, Schneider said.

“I have what’s kind of a stereotypical autistic memory, which is a very good memory of details and facts, which has been helpful in different ways as a priest.”

He has also found that he can overcome some of the challenges associated with autism by using a method called Theory of Mind, in which he guesses what another person is thinking as he talks to them. It also helps him prepare homilies and write articles, by anticipating how his audience may react as they read or hear his work.

“That’s a conscious thing I do, whereas most people just do that

subconsciously," he explained.

Even with those tools, however, there are some assignments that would be especially challenging for an autistic priest, Schneider said.

A typical parish assignment or role as a school chaplain would present struggles for Schneider, given the difficulty that autistic people tend to have in picking up on nonverbal cues, particularly during face-to-face conversations.

Right now, Schneider is working on a doctoral thesis in theology, while also helping out at the Maryland retreat centre where he lives.

His said his goal is to become a seminary professor or a writer, since these "are fields that as an autistic I think I'm going to succeed in more than in a lot of other more stereotypical priestly ministries, like parishes or chaplaincies."

The priest said his superiors in the Legion of Christ have been very supportive of him.

"I wasn't sure what kind of attitude (they'd have) or what kind of things they'd want when I was diagnosed," he said.

But he was met with support and encouragement, "just in simple things such as helping me move toward ministries where I am going to be more likely to succeed in as an autistic person."

Until now, Schneider has not has spoken widely about his diagnosis with people outside of his community. He maintains two Twitter accounts – a public one under his name and an anonymous one with the handle **@AutisticPriest**, where he posts about faith and autism.

Schneider said he decided to go public with his story out a desire for transparency and a hope of evangelizing.

"I thought that by coming forward, I would be able to go through and look at how we can better present the Gospel in a way adapted to the autistic mind," he said.

A lot of contemporary catechesis presents the truths of the faith in ways that are not inherently wrong, but are not adapted to an autistic way of thinking, Schneider explained.

Oftentimes, "we can present the faith in an emotional way that is good for a lot of people, but we autistics tend to think much more logically," he said.

"So just simply a more logical explanation is more helpful...so we understand why. We tend to be less easily satisfied asking why. We

don't have the social cue that a lot of kids have, or a lot of young people have, where after you've asked why three or four times, you kind of stop...we'll keep asking until we understand it, because that's kind of the more logical way our brain works in that regard."

Prayer can also be a challenge for autistic people, at first.

"In prayer, a lot of times we struggle at the beginning because we struggle to understand how other people are thinking as we are talking," the priest said.

But once the expectations for prayer have been adapted for an autistic mindset, it "can be very freeing to realize we can communicate directly with God and we don't have to go through the means of human language."

Autistic people may struggle to bring concept or ideas into human language, while hoping other people will understand the point they are trying to get across, Schneider said. "But with God in prayer, I can directly share my ideas with God, without bringing it into human language."

Schneider hopes to see catechetical materials and programs developed to better address these features of the autistic mind. He also noted that autistic people "tend to have very strong long-term memory. That can be an advantage for us learning the faith, in the sense that we don't ever forget what we're taught, so we don't have to do as much repetition."

In addition, he sees a need for better social inclusion for autistic people in schools and parishes, since they may feel isolated or have trouble integrating at first.

"We have to bring those people into the community," he said, suggesting that a Christian understanding of charity should foster this inclusion.

He said he once spoke with a secular psychologist who told him that efforts to help autistic people enter social groups "have a much higher success rate with religious groups, because there is that sense of charity and that sense of openness to other people who may struggle and may have difficulties, more than in non-religious groups."

Moving forward, Schneider plans to release YouTube videos on topics such as prayer and Christian theology, presented in a manner that is more conducive to the autistic mind.

He hopes to start a broader discussion within the Church on how to minister to people with autism, both those already in the pews and those who are not Catholic but may be interested in learning about the faith if it were taught in a way that was adapted to their mindset.

Asked what message he would offer other autistic Catholics, he said the message

is fundamentally the same for all people.

“Jesus loves us, Jesus wants the best for us, whatever our situation is life is, and as autistics, we have the opportunity to experience God’s love in an autistic way. We don’t have to conform our own experience of God, in prayer and in the liturgy, to how others think, but we can experience it our own way, which is 100 per cent valid.”