

Special Mass celebrates unique gifts of people with disabilities

Side by side, Giselle Horne and her daughter Sarah proceeded down the aisle of Corpus Christi Church. As Sarah's wheelchair came to a stop before the altar, they offered Rev. Jim Corrigan the bread and wine that would soon be consecrated as Christ's body and blood.



Giselle Horne Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

It was a poignant moment in the south Edmonton parish's first Mass for people with special needs on Aug. 9. The Mass was held to welcome and worship with people from across the Edmonton area who live with physical and mental disabilities.

"Having a special Mass to express how people living with disabilities are valued is wonderful," Horne said. "People with special needs want to feel like their part of the community. I see this as a starting point for them to feel more inclusion, to feel valued and to feel a part of the larger Church community."

Because of a rare chromosomal abnormality, Horne's daughter was born with a cleft palate, a hole in her heart, hearing loss, a seizure disorder, paralyzed vocal chords and other conditions.

But whatever challenges and obstacles they face, Horne says Sarah's life is a continual reminder of God's grace.

"Her abilities certainly outweigh her disabilities," she said. "I've seen evidence throughout her life of how perfectly God made her. God sent her here to be a beacon of His love and grace, and those of us who nurture Sarah – we receive that grace through her.

"I feel like I've received so much more from her than she has received from me."



Francis Lajeunesse and Floyd DeSouza Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Inspired by a similar Mass held at St. Patrick's Church in Calgary, the Mass for people with special needs was organized by Knights of Columbus members Francis Lajeunesse and Floyd DeSouza. A sense of welcoming and community is the heart of their effort, said Lajeunesse, who plans to make this Mass an annual event.

"It's important to celebrate and acknowledge everyone's uniqueness," he said. "We're all wonderfully made, it doesn't matter who we are or what we have, God welcomes us into this world and into the Church."



Carlos Gonzalez proclaims the First Reading at the Mass for people with special needs. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Father Corrigan called the congregation together with this same message in his homily. Reflecting on the "physical infirmity" of St. Paul and how Jesus healed the blind man, Corrigan said all people live with their own special needs and desire for God's healing.

Mass was followed by lunch and a few short speeches. Lajeunesse and DeSouza put

the event together over two months, along with donations and support from other parishes, organizations and fellow Knights of Columbus members.

Groups like DATs (Disabled Adult Transit Service) and CapitalCare helped connect Lajeunesse and DeSouza with hospitals, care centres and others to spread the word about the Mass. While they hoped to get at least 50 people, more than 100 attended the afternoon service.



Marlene Melnychuk Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Marlene Melnychuk, who lives with encephalitis and cerebral palsy, was invited and got to attend her first Catholic Mass.

“I really appreciate everything that was done today, and it was nice to finally understand and see a Catholic Mass,” she said. “It really touched my heart.”

Pianist Juston Whaling also performed in the church immediately after the Mass. While Whaling was born blind, he has played the piano since he was three years old and is now renowned for his musical ability.

“When Francis asked me to play, I felt very honoured and very blessed,” he said. “It’s my first opportunity to play in a church.”



Juston Whaling performs a piano solo after the Mass has ended. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

When scoping out the parishes of the Archdiocese of Edmonton, DeSouza said Corpus Christi was chosen because of its accessibility with ramps, washrooms and adequate space for wheelchairs and walkers.

This accessibility has made Corpus Christi home for Horne and her family. As well, the parish is working to replace all of its lighting with LED lights, she said. LED lights are safer for people, like her daughter, who suffer from seizure disorders.



Sal Ficaccio Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

Sal Ficaccio, program director with the Knights of Columbus Alberta-Northwest Territories State Board, drove from Calgary to attend the Mass. With a successful service for people with special needs in Calgary and now Edmonton, he hopes it will become a common sight in other parishes of the province as

well.

“The seed has now been planted, so let’s keep watering it and make it grow,” said Ficaccio. “It’s important that this is put in place. This shows people with special needs that they can be participants in the Church. They are accepted in the eyes of God.”