

redemptive value of suffering will go beyond mere human sympathy to authentic solidarity in suffering, a bond between persons rooted in love.

In short, mental health care workers must have a formation that gives them an authentically Christian understanding of the person, made in the image and likeness of God and

What can you do?

- Understand and show others that the rehabilitation of mentally ill persons is a duty of all society, with special preference for those in greatest need
- Welcome all persons with disabilities into the parish community and embrace successful parish-based programs
- Promote social and physical environments that enhance human relations and create for mentally ill persons a sense of belonging to a community
- Foster the healthy development of children, including their mental functioning
- Fight against mentalities of moral relativism, consumerism, sexual license and instant gratification
- Share the Word of God with persons with mental illness, as their mental and physical condition allows it⁴

redeemed by Jesus Christ. A formation that gives them a proper understanding of the person's nature and destiny will lead them to care for the person as a brother or sister, and to seek as much as possible to restore the per-

son's interior freedom and the capacity to orient his life toward the truth of his existence.

Society in general also has an obligation to foster a serene, balanced way of life in stable families, a workplace promoting true human goods and authentic growth of individuals, a solid consensus on clear moral standards by which we will live together, and real objectivity about behaviors which are detrimental to the health of the culture.

And finally, the Church community itself has a great opportunity and responsibility to recognize and witness to the uniqueness of each member. The parish community must create that counter-cultural environment, in which all people can claim an equal place and contribute through presence and action.

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- ¹ Pope John Paul II, International Conference for Health Care Workers, on Illness of the Human Mind, November 30, 1996.
- ² Pope John Paul II, International Conference for Health Care Workers, on Illness of the Human Mind, February 11, 1984.
- ³ Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, Address at World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2006
- ⁴ Adapted from Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, Address at World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2006

The full-length version of this article is posted at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/gill.pdf>.



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THE PERSON WITH MENTAL ILLNESS: BEARING GOD'S IMAGE

Rev. Richard Gill, L.C.



Respect Life

Pope John Paul II has written: “Whoever suffers from mental illness ‘always’ bears God’s image and likeness in themselves, as does every human being. In addition, they ‘always’ have the inalienable right not only to be considered as an image of God and therefore a person, but also to be treated as such.”¹

In recent decades, the world has grown much more effective in mobilizing against major health threats such as AIDS, heart disease, cancer and the diseases whose statistics frighten us with their devastating impact on humanity. It is relatively easy to raise awareness of such threats and marshal human and financial resources to combat them. In the area of mental health, however, the situation is quite different.

Incidence of Mental Illness

It has been estimated that worldwide, as many as 500 million people are affected by some sort of mental illness. It is also said that the United States has the highest rate of mental illness of all the advanced nations: one in four adult Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. Yet there is relatively little public awareness of the scope of the problem. And tragically, the stereotypes and stigma which are so often attached to mental illness help to create a culture where those who are affected are falsely seen as helpless victims or objects of charity.

Mental Illness and Our Culture

Without addressing in any great detail the range of medical causes and treatments of mental illness or milder forms of mental or emotional problems, it would be helpful to reflect on the impact of a culture of violence and a culture of materialism. Causes of mental illness vary widely, from inherited chemical imbalances responsible for the development of such illnesses as depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, to brain disease, to causes that are more immediately under our control. These man-made causes include, in many areas of the world, the spread of terrorism, the very purpose of which is to inflict widespread mental and emotional suffering. War, with its related atrocities and crimes, can bring out the worst aspects of our nature.

Additional challenges to mental health arise from the general state of culture, the weakening of moral standards, and trends within the culture that work against the true goods of the human person. For many, especially the vulnerable, phenomena such as hedonism and materialism, all too common in advanced societies, can foster exaggerated hopes of pleasure and reward and distorted notions of what constitutes success. Unrealizable hopes leave in their wake people who are severely discouraged and exasperated. Our increasingly technocratic and production-oriented culture tends to neglect the goods of the spirit, the things that make life more properly “human.” Human values are defined more in terms of a “culture of having” rather than a “culture of being.”

Our Response to People with Mental Illness

In a society that judges a person on the value of what he produces, the mentally ill person is easily seen merely as a burden on society. As Christians, then, we are called unceasingly to affirm their dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God and to recognize their value to the community. “It is everyone’s duty to make an active response; our actions must show that mental illness does not create insurmountable distances . . . Indeed it should inspire a particularly attentive attitude.”²

In what ways do mentally ill persons faithfully reflect the image of God? In an address to health care workers in February 2006, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, observed that “the mentally ill person resembles our Lord on the cross; and since the cross is the only way to resurrection, the mentally ill person . . . is worthier and reaches such a level of excellence because of the magnitude of his love and the suffering he endures.”³

The dedication of so many individuals at work in the field of mental health points us to the dignity of people with mental illness. Often they work amid many difficulties, and it can be challenging to recognize the human dignity of the persons they serve. Caregivers for people with mental illness need a formation of the heart, because they are dealing with human beings who need to be treated at every moment in accord with their God-given dignity. Mental health care workers with a deeply Christian understanding of the