DISABILITY INCLUSION: RE-ENVISAGING SOLIDARITY WITH DEAF PEOPLE AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

KRISTINE C. MENESES, PH.D.

It is with little dispute that Deaf people and Persons with Disabilities are considered to be some of the vulnerable groups in society. We are made aware of their predicaments through documentaries and short films. But their experience of exclusion, demand for recognition of their rights, and change in the system are seldom tackled in academia, more so in the field of theology. In this respect, this article attempts to address this gap by re-thinking vulnerability. I would argue that the current perception of the Church and society about Deaf people and PWDs as vulnerable has enabled ableism in our consciousness. With this, I believe that employing Judith Butler's view on the precarity of vulnerability in the Othering (/exclusionary) experiences of Deaf people and PWDs could pave a way for a shift of paradigm in the Church and society from seeing them as welfare recipients to collaborators and contributors. When that happens, we can claim that disability inclusion is indeed a reality.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the world was caught off guard as governments and individuals were unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. When the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the virus in circulation was a pandemic, nations and individuals were in panic. Countries began to implement strict lockdowns and curfews, borders were closed— both domestic and international, work and education were conducted remotely. Similarly, people who can afford stockpiled goods, while those in poverty suffered more, not knowing how they were going to survive. When the world momentarily stopped, it resulted in the closure of establishments (temporary for some, while permanently for others), there was a disruption in the food supply, many workers were retrenched especially the daily wage earners. Consequently, there was increased hunger. Other than economic impact, there were also other concerns like the increase of violence and misunderstandings in the households and local governments. Regional conflicts also emerged, such as the Hong Kong protests, the military junta in Myanmar, and the aggression of Beijing, China towards Taiwan and the Philippines.

These are the facts we often hear in the news, read in the newspapers, and updated newsfeeds on social media. However, there is one sector of society whose plight remained invisible yet was greatly impacted by this pandemic.[1] What do we know about the lives and struggles of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) during this COVID-19 outbreak? Even before this health emergency, the PWDs were on the fringes of society. However, the pandemic has amplified their vulnerability, just as their stories were ignored.

The marginalization of the Deaf and PWDs in modern society and the Church (sadly) is not due to the disability of the individual.[2] Rather, from Judith Butler's standpoint, I would argue that their vulnerability has rested much of a charity model of disability, where they are beneficiaries of welfare. Charity is well-meaning. No argument on that. However, we also have to consider how the charity has covertly retained power relations that perpetuate ableism.

In this regard, I hope that this paper will be a step towards a paradigm shift from ableist-deficit orientation to a concrete form of solidarity with and for PWDs. Hence, this paper is divided into three parts, beginning with the context of PWDs from the Global North to the Global South. The second part focuses on the politics of vulnerability and examines the argument made by Judith Butler on the precarity of vulnerability. From Butler's standpoint, this paper takes on to suggest concrete ways to gradually diminish the vulnerability in society through disability inclusion, particularly by PWDs, which is the content of the third part of this paper.

---

[1] Disability rights during the pandemic: A global report on findings of the COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor

[2] Many of us view disability as an individual issue or problem that a person of their family has to deal with it.

IN CONTEXT: PWDS DURING THIS PANDEMIC

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, PWDs were on the margins. The pandemic aggravated their condition, exacerbated inequalities, and intensified inaccessibility, because they were invisible in the mind and considered as the least priority, before and during this pandemic. Being ignored by society is not new to them, but it got worse and more hurtful today. For instance, in Europe, the number of deaths of PWDs was disproportionately high compared to non-disabled people. The United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, admitted that PWDs were already in unequal condition before the pandemic, and they are more than ever at high risk to be infected with the coronavirus.[3] Though one might contest that there are no hard data that will show the exact number of PWDs who died of COVID-19 complications, but in the United Kingdom alone, their deaths are 6x higher (6 in 10) as compared to the general population. It has come to PWD activists' attention that their group receives less support than they should, especially, those who are clinically vulnerable or who are institutionalized. There were reports that PWDs who are in care homes were neglected and abandoned. Such incidents of days being caged, diapers were unchanged for days, or no decent meals were provided. There was also a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitizers, and masks at the facilities.

The most daunting reality is that PWDs were denied access to life-saving treatments, which is a triage issue. The triage is a medical screening of patients; they are scaled or sorted to determine who will be prioritized for treatment. If the score of the patient is higher than 5, then critical care is not considered appropriate for that patient. Some of the criteria to be disqualified for critical care is when the patient has a stable and long-term condition such as autism, cerebral palsy, or intellectual disability. There were instances that an intellectually disabled patient was denied an

---

[3] People and Power: COVID's Disabled Victims, posted by *Al Jazeera Media Network*, February 4, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/people-power/2021/2/4/covids-disabled-victims.

Intensive Care Unit (ICU) bed because he/she was seen to be clinically frail based on the triage scale. In a sense, this de-prioritizes care for the PWDs, which is offensive because it seems that the government and society consider such health rights that are afforded to them is a luxury. Furthermore, disturbing reports indicate that a general and blanket form of "Do Not Resuscitate" (DNR) applies to PWDs without their consent and no notification is even given to their immediate families. In addition, for disability activists such as Simone Aspis,[4] what is happening is simply modern-day eugenics. Hence, the message seems clear, PWDs are expendable. The triage guidelines (that were implemented in Spain and UK)[5] were brought to the attention of the WHO. The amended guideline clarifies that the triage should not be used in certain groups such as those with learning or intellectual disabilities or with stable long-term disabilities.

The PWDs were not only at risk but they were doubly jeopardized because of the difficulty to access goods and services, particularly in the Philippines. It must be remembered that most PWDs are also not well-off economically, because companies seldom hire them. Information dissemination about the virus as well as access and guidelines about vaccination for PWDs were lacking. Also, PWDs were not categorically identified in the list of priorities for vaccination. It must be said that there are PWDs whose health conditions are compounded and have a higher risk of contracting the virus. That makes their situation even more deplorable. It seems therefore that governments have forgotten the PWDs who also face the risk of not being vaccinated if the distribution is not planned out well. This is another instance of exclusion.

When most countries implemented stringent lockdowns and health protocols, PWDs were disproportionately impacted. We

---

[4] Simone Aspis has been campaigning for PWDs for the last 25 years. She also is an advocate, working for the rights of PWDs, and has engaged with the grassroots and the national level. She has learning disabilities.

[5] In the United Kingdom, it is the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) that formulated the guidelines for the end of care treatment of PWDs, particularly those infected with COVID-19.

need to recognize that there are PWDs who need close physical care. Therefore, physical distancing is clearly against their needs. While many have benefitted from food and services delivery apps, these are not for sightless people, because the digital interface lacks screen-readers. Another challenge for those with intellectual, learning, and stable long-term disability who needs proximity is distance learning because this proved to be counterproductive.

During a more eased community quarantine, as I was closing our gate, a wheeler approached me and begged for some amount that I can spare him. This initiated a spontaneous conversation between the two of us. He told me that they used to have a consortium with *Tahanang Walang Hagdanan*,[6] but due to the pandemic, the shop was forced to close. I further inquired if they received any cash assistance through the *Bayanihan* Act 1 that the Philippine government has committed to providing. He said they never received anything from the national government. Hence, the reason they were forced to beg for the survival of their families. He was with three other wheelers, who go house-to-house begging for money or goods. Likewise, sightless people also faced similar struggles. We often see them in the malls, working as body masseurs. But the strict protocol of physical distancing prevents them to do their job. Though now, some Spas or wellness clinics have re-opened but must conform with the strict guidelines on wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). How can the sightless afford PPE, when they do not have any income to feed their families? As for the Deaf, the hardest thing is physical distancing. A case was raised to me, that a Deaf was going through depression and did not have access to psychotherapy. My Deaf community is quite an exception, perhaps, because some of them still have their jobs, others are supported by their families, and we are still able to meet virtually for the TV Mass[7] and the Sunday

---

[6] *Tahanang Walang Hagdanan*, Inc. (TWHI) is a non-stock, non-government organization, providing services to persons with disabilities (PWD) for 48 years now. Most of their programs cater to orthopedically challenged individuals. They aim to improve the lives of these people by providing them livelihood training and educational assistance. More information about this organization is available at http://twh.org.ph/#.

[7] Our Deaf community has a remote Eucharist celebration via Zoom and FB live, courtesy of the Vincentian clergies.

gospel sharing. Yet our Deaf community also wonders about those who do not have enough funds to spare for internet access, even just for data (mobile phone) usage. Access to information, such as TV News and TV Mass[8] insets are in place, but the Deaf complains that they hardly see the interpreter because the size of the inset is scanty.

Indeed, the Church has not forgotten the spiritual needs of the people in this pandemic, and we seek to make sense of the struggles and uncertainty. To address this, the local Church provided varied forms of digital programs, such as "seminars" or online reflections. However, this caters mainly to the hearing mainstream, because inset or closed captions were not provided, resulting in the exclusion of the Deaf people.[9] We need to recognize that spiritual activities, such as recollection and retreat for Deaf people entail a different dynamic and process.[10] To overlook the needs and to assume how such spiritual exercise will be conducted for the Deaf is a form of (un)conscious exclusionary practice. In the same manner, governments have overlooked the sensorial understanding and embodied experiences of the PWDs in this pandemic.

In establishing how PWDs were invisible in society's eyes, a question arose here, "how did we arrive with such unequal consideration toward the PWDs?" Could this be from how we perceive them? In the next section, I will attempt to have a closer look at categorizing the PWDs as vulnerable and see how such perception perpetuates or enabled their condition.

---

[8] With regard to TV Masses, only a few do provide an inset or a closed caption. Even before the pandemic, there were only a few parishes that accommodate the Deaf with a Signed Mass.

[9] Before the pandemic, parishes conduct general recollection, either during Lent or Advent, but this is highly meant for the mainstream hearing people. This is again an example that we assume that the Deaf is the same as the hearing.

[10] Often pastors do not have time to give them a recollection (at least), some are intimidated because they do not know the sign language, or many are not well oriented about the dynamics of Deaf when it comes to such spiritual exercise.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY

One of the principles of the Catholic Social Traditions (or Teachings) is the preferential option for the poor and the most vulnerable, where we are called to address the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. However, whenever the Church refer to the poor and the vulnerable it is always from the dimension of charity, such as in Pope Paul VI's apostolic letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, where it states:

> In teaching us charity, the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights to place their goods more generously at the service of others.[11]

Another is a pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, where the bishops briefly explain "option for the poor," is not a Church's slogan, rather it is the "deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons. These wounds will be healed only by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves."[12]

For a direct reference on PWDs, in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis together with the bishops are aware of the challenges that families face who have a member with special needs have "unexpected challenge of dealing with a disability can upset a family's equilibrium, desires, and expectations . . . Families who lovingly accept the difficult trials of a child with special needs . . . can discover, together with the Christian community . . . a different way of understanding and identifying with others."[13]

---

[11] Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens: A Call to Action*, 23 (Vatican: Vatican Library, 1971).

[12] United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* 88, no.6 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986).

[13] Pope Francis, "*Amoris Laetitia*, 47.

Among the selected catholic social teachings, it can be said that PWDs are considered powerless, a sort of disruption, and a challenge. Perhaps, the pitfall of many of us is to pin their condition and identify them as poor, thus making them subject/object of charity and social welfare. The situation of PWDs, as cited above, although not categorically identified as vulnerable, can nonetheless be considered as such. The immediate response of the Church and society to a vulnerable state is charity, which indeed helps. Looking at the structure of the society, the PWDs strive to survive and are less likely to thrive. A shortfall in being critical, categorizing individuals, sectors, or communities as vulnerable could be problematic. This is because such a paradigm perpetuates a charity model, that is seeing their condition as pitiful and tragic. There is a need to recognize that disability is not an individual problem, rather, it is a social concern and shortcoming. If we see it this way, the latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* of Pope Francis makes sense when he identified the PWDs as "hidden exiles," who felt "they exist without belonging and without participating."[14] It is possible that the charity model has covertly maintained power relations, thus perpetuates not only vulnerability but another form of discrimination – ableism.

There are two ways of looking at vulnerability. For, Alasdair MacIntyre, vulnerability is a condition that all of us experience, hence it is a shared human possibility and condition. If this is the case, he argues that vulnerability calls for solidarity and collective responsibility.[15] MacIntyre suggests society should build networks of giving and receiving where we participate because it is through it that we are constantly being reminded and recognize the needs of others, and therefore provide care. His position seems to be from a standpoint of reciprocity because we in varying degrees are vulnerable, hence need one another.[16] His view is reasonable and benevolent, however, Amber Knight saw some shortcomings in MacIntyre's position. She argues that MacIntyre falls short in recognizing that there has already been an unequal distribution of

---

[14] Pope Francis, "*Fratelli Tutti*, 98.

[15] Amber Knight, "Disability as Vulnerability: Redistributing Precariousness in Democratic Ways," *The Journal of Politics*, 76, no. 1, (January 2014): 15-26, 17.

[16] Ibid., 17-18.

vulnerability, which I agree with. Looking at the political, cultural, socio-economic, and ecclesial sphere, vulnerability is not only precarious but there is a degree of precarity. This means that there are groups that are more vulnerable than others, such as the PWDs that we should recognize. It needs to be acknowledged that risks and exposure to discrimination are distributed unevenly.[17]

Similarly, Judith Butler problematized the precarious condition of vulnerability in our society, particularly in the political sphere. Butler starts with an inquiry as to why certain sectors or groups are worthy of grief, while others were considered disposable, or the least were ungrievable.[18] Butler affirms that vulnerability is an ontological and existential reality, but its precariousness is distributed unequally. This is because, humans are interdependent, and therefore, there is the tendency to violate or be violated by others, for humans are bounded by their needs. Unlike MacIntyre, Butler avoids treating vulnerability simply as a universally shared human condition and in its precariousness. Rather, she asserts that the inequality behind "vulnerability is affected by power relations" and structures.[19] Such unequal distribution of vulnerability is what Butler refers to as precarity. For her, precarity is a politically induced condition as well as structures such as classism, sexism, racism, ableism, and the like that segregate people, hence, making certain groups in society are dehumanized and experience disproportionate exposure to violence, injury, hunger, and death among others.[20] In addition, Butler sees vulnerability from a lens of victimhood and dependence to an anonymous Other, thus enabling disempowerment and curtailing PWDs' agency. In her book, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, [21] Judith Butler asserts that vulnerability is understood as victimization and passivity, which exposes (the PWDs) to danger, while the society/structure enables. In this regard, PWDs are doubly jeopardized. In this sense, Butler takes embodied difference and political power relations seriously,

---

[17] Ibid., 18.

[18] Ibid., 19.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds., *Vulnerability in Resistance*, (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

hence she calls for collective obligation and a coalition that moves towards progressive reform that transcends accommodation and integration, particularly of PWDs. The view of Butler aims at a paradigm shift, that even challenges the Church that seems to remain in a charity model in its treatment of PWDs, thus its constant urge to solidarity is wanting. Indeed, the Church is critical to oppressive structures, yet there is a need to re-imagine vulnerability, from a tragic, limiting, and negative view, rather than see it as again, a positive disruption of the standard that makes way to see new possibilities that is incomprehensible with a "normal eye."

As suggested by Butler, coalition and the collective obligation must be oriented towards liberation, therefore, where are we to begin if we want to present an alternate view of vulnerability? In this regard, Rabbi Julia Watts-Belser would be an apt reference. She suggests the need to, (1) recognize what enables the vulnerability of PWDs, (2) acknowledge that ableism remains widespread, (3) identify the violence or oppressive actions that push the PWDs in the fringes of society and the Church, and (4) confront the politics of triage and (medical) rationing.[22] Ableism is all around us, this means that we give priority and value to people who can perform tasks under a "normal" requirement. Ableism is seen in our infrastructures, building structures, our strictures, academy, perspectives, representations, and the list can go on. To some disability advocates, capitalism and techno-feudalism have a hand in enabling vulnerability or as Butler's term precarity. Indeed, it is benevolent to love one's neighbor, especially the least and the last, but this must translate to a concrete commitment that will eradicate exclusion and the precarity that PWDs endure each day. The PWDs have borne the brunt of a brutal society; they have experienced and felt how their lives were seen as less valued, and the pandemic lays it plain before them.

---

[22] Julia Watts-Belser, post to "Disability and the Politics of Vulnerability," *Georgetown University Berkley Forum*, April 15, 2020, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/disability-and-the-politics-of-vulnerability.

Butler's claim of precarity was experienced by one of our Deaf members. She shared with me that, though the Church intended to aid the poor, nonetheless, the Church wrongly assumes that their needs are the same with the Deaf and PWDs. She felt that the Deaf and the PWDs are the least prioritized in society and the Church, who are often an afterthought. The Deaf and PWDs are disproportionately marginalized. Similarly, many of us still assume that their needs can be addressed via the social action ministry in our parishes. In 2013, some, Deaf, sign language interpreters, and Deaf advocates met two church authorities, we discussed the possibility of having an episcopal commission for the Deaf. The local church has episcopal commissions on Social Action, Justice and Peace, on Indigenous Peoples, on Migrants and Itinerant Workers, on Women, and the Youth, yet there is none for the Deaf or even for PWDs. Isn't the belief that their needs are incorporated with these commissions, a subtle way of discarding the voices of the Deaf and PWDs, and therefore in some ways is exclusionary?

The precarity they experience coupled with the presumed needs of the PWDs resulted in their removal in the equation of conversation, participation, and decision-making. Inclusion begins with recognizing and acknowledging how society and the church were enablers of vulnerability (in a negative sense). It is high time that we work towards authentic disability inclusion. Then, what are some concrete actions that we can do to affect inclusion?

DISABILITY INCLUSION: RE-ENVISAGING SOLIDARITY

The concerns of PWDs have historically been overlooked, structurally unaddressed, socially stigmatized, and culturally unexplored. Our society is structured and functions only for non-disabled people. For PWDs, transversing in a world without them in mind is a challenge and at times frustrating, all the more during this pandemic. The thrust of the Church, which is the preferential option for the poor and most vulnerable seems to work around the framework of charity, and less on the empowerment of PWDs. They have been treated as ones who are dependent or always in need of help. A disability studies scholar, Lennard Davis, has asserted that PWDs and disabilities challenge non-disabled or "normal" people to see the quotation marks around their presumed and privileged status, which enforces vulnerability and disablement.

One might argue that the Church has accommodated the Deaf and other PWDs, which could be a start (and has been long overdue) but this is enough. For Glory Cynthia Shinde, the Church has been pegged with seeing the PWDs as charity objects, where its missional interventions fail to defend, affirm, and promote their rights.[23] She challenges the Church to "undertake an operating mode of paying attention to PWDs and other excluded communities . . . (it) is deficient in taking efforts for well-studied analytical data of PWDs."[24] Moreover, Shinde asserts that the inclusion of PWDs in the Church is lacking.[25] It is clear that the Church must go beyond the charity model of disability or charity paradigm where PWDs are merely welfare recipients. They have the right to belong to society and participate in the Church, yet they often sense exclusion, because barriers such as structures, attitudes, cultures, and messages (words/signs) exist. The Church and the society need to have a fundamental shift from ableist-deficit-oriented thinking to re-envisaging solidarity that respects their identity, culture, and dignity.

The pandemic has disrupted and halted our lives and, in many ways, has highlighted and exposed to public consciousness a deeper and problematic gap between non-disabled people and the Deaf and PWDs. Such gap is not only disabling but likewise unjust, thereby displacing many of them further to the fringes of society. Nonetheless, the pandemic could be an opportunity to reassess, scrutinize, and decisively act on how we can truly realize the inclusion of the Deaf and PWDs in the life of the Church, whose participation and contribution have been undermined and even doubted (by ableists).

---

[23] Glory Cynthia Shinde, "Ramp: An Inclusion Renovation Towards an Accessible Church," in *Disability Theology in Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies* (Kolkata: EDAN-WCC/PTCA/ATEM/ SATHRI/YTCS, 2019), 407-416, 411.

[24] Ibid., 413.

[25] Ibid.

Going back to Pope Francis' observation and articulation in *Fratelli Tutti,* that PWDs felt "they exist without belonging and without participating,"[26] the Catholic church implicitly values their participation. To provide a space and to welcome Deaf people and PWDs to participate in church communities by giving them responsibilities or a post could be a step towards disability inclusion. A more concrete way of actualizing disability inclusion is by providing access and opportunity to PWDs such as in employment, communication, services, support groups, business, and community/parochial activities where they can participate and contribute to the collective well-being of the society. To reiterate Shine, there is a need to recognize their rights, which can be a step in empowering them. Similarly, being a person with a disability, Dr. Hannah Barham-Brown once asserted that they are society's problem-solver because they need to transverse in a world where they were never been considered.[27] With this circumstance, they were made creative and resilient to overcome challenges each day. This does not mean that society need not create change, but it matters for PWDs to fully participate and sense inclusion, and not integration; hence, barriers must be torn down. Unfortunately, we do not have a close estimate of the number of PWDs in the Philippines, but the World Bank estimates that there are one billion PWDs in the world.[28]

Given this population of PWDs, industries are missing a lot by untapping their skills and possible contribution to society and even to the Church.[29] Many of the industries and some Churches remain hesitant to welcome the full participation of PWDs. Some of the few yet firm root causes of hesitancy from the non-disabled society are our unconscious bias against PWDs, our

---

[26] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 98.

[27] Hannah Barham-Brown, "Disability and work: Let's stop wasting talent," filmed April 2019 in Exeter, England, *TED video*, 14:51, https://www.ted.com/talks/hannah_barham_brown_disability_and_work_let_s_stop_wasting_talent?language=en

[28] The World Bank, "Disability Inclusion," *The World Bank Group*, accessed February 25, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability.

[29] *CBS 60 Minutes*, "Recruiting for the Autism Spectrum," Anderson Cooper, aired October 4, 2020, on CBS News, accessed October 5, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/autism-employment-60-minutes-2020-10-04/

false and negative assumptions, concerns over the expenses when we accommodate them, and unfamiliarity about disability. As a consequence of this partiality, we have abandoned the effort to interact or engage with them. Yet one common observation among PWDs is that the mainstream simply lacks patience in dealing with them, which I had a first-hand admittance from a human resource manager. In recognizing these barriers, we can find concrete ways to effect and practice inclusion, not only in a society in general but also in the church (parochial/diocese) in particular.

Disability is commonly thought to be something visible, but some disabilities are invisible, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain, autism spectrum disorder or neurodivergent individuals, developmental disability, and other mental illnesses, which we also must acknowledge. More than acknowledging the barriers, we also need to recondition ourselves at having a different perspective about disability, that is, to remove entirely an ableist paradigm. Ableism is a form of discrimination that is oppressive and offensive, reflected in our (un)conscious bias, where non-disabled people are preferred.[30] Usually, this is in the form of stereotypes we have in mind against PWDs, often shows in misrepresentations about them that perpetuate in the media, offensive biblical interpretations, academic, and so on. Another is the stigma internalized even by the person with a disability because this has been injected by families, religion, communities, cultures, and the like into their consciousness. Also, to create a seamless shift of the ableist paradigm, perhaps we need to see disability as diversity, similar to ethnicity, gender, age, race, and religion. The Church in particular often lobbies solidarity and equality must therefore be at the forefront and ensure that PWDs do experience an environment that is free from physical, digital, attitudinal, and social barriers.[31]

---

[30] To be more aware if we have ableist attitudes and paradigms, see Sara Nović, “The harmful ableist language you unknowingly use,” *BBC Worklife*, April 5, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210330-the-harmful-ableist-language-you-unknowingly-use.

[31] Disability Hub Europe, “Making the future of work inclusive of people with disabilities,” *European Union-European Social Fund*, accessed February 25, 2021, http://www.businessanddisability.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PDF_acc_FoW_PwD.pdf

To practice disability inclusion, organizations, industries, academies, as well as the church, particularly at the parochial level should have in place orientations and training about disability and together with this to scrutinize, recognize, and acknowledge an ableist culture that perpetuates in their domain. One effective means to eliminate stigma and (un)conscious bias is through conversation with them and education. In addition, if the Church is truly committed to living out the CST on opting for the poor and most vulnerable and wanting full participation from PWDs, then I would challenge Catholic institutions, academies, parishes, and dioceses to hire PWDs. Integrate disability awareness or Disability Studies in your curriculum, more specifically in Christian Living subjects and Theology courses. When it comes to infrastructure, assess if your structure and environment create trust and respect that makes PWDs comfortable and welcomed.

Perhaps, some of you are affiliated with an academy, and those who are part of the Church as religious or ordained need to constantly remind ourselves of the presence of disabling environments, an ableist-deficit orientation in our society, and if we unconsciously carry exclusionary practices. We need to exercise conscious reflexivity, which is a process where we honestly scrutinize our perspectives, behavior, and attitudes that enable exclusionary practices in the Church, society, and the academy.[32]

One possible positive result of this pandemic is the invitation to re-envisage solidarity through disability inclusion.[33] Solidarity should not remain abstract, it must be tangible, real, and pragmatic that can create change in how we do things in the Church particularly towards the Deaf and PWDs communities.

---

[32] Shelly Tremain, *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 291.

[33] The term reflexive self-consciousness coined by Eugene Halliday refers to a consciousness that is self-transparent and aware of its presence and effect in the world. This could be adapted to Foucault's ethical practices as identified by Julie Allan. Ibid., 284.

CONCLUSION

This pandemic is challenging us to discard our preconditioned and assumed knowledge about who and what the PWDs need and desire. It is imperative that space be provided for them where they can safely articulate what the Church, society, and academy must do to make disability inclusion not a mere statement, but a reality. Dialogue can only happen when there is a well-founded relationship, otherwise, we are just making noises and are just talking amongst ourselves. Engage the Deaf people and PWDs, include them in ecclesial/parochial conversations. Also, to undertake disability inclusion, it matters that we recognize the intersectionality of deafness and disability, because this can be an opportunity to remove the gap between scholarship and solidarity (activism/advocacy). These will only make sense if we give the privilege to Deaf and PWDs by letting them lead us to a deeper awareness and understanding of their context and how the Church collectively and authentically practice disability inclusion and solidarity. We often speak of dialogue with other religions/beliefs or cultures, yet we missed out on the fact that persons with disabilities also have a culture and a context, such as Deaf culture, to which we need to be aware and be oriented. It is paramount to have a meaningful, honest, and authentic engagement[34] with them that could result in their active participation and collaboration.

Though the present situation or location of the Deaf and the PWDs in our Church remains on the fringes, they remain positive and hopeful. To reverberate what I have observed and felt being with the Deaf and some PWDs, they believe that our society is too advanced not to recognize the justice and solidarity the Deaf people and PWDs still await. They hunger for something better, thus they are inspired, determined, and moved to work for a future where all the barriers crumble and fall, [35] yet they still lack

---

[34] The engagement is likewise a conversation that builds rapport and trust.

[35] Lindsey Patterson, "Unlikely Alliances: Crossing the Deaf and Hearing Divide," in Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Studies, eds. Susan Burch and Alison Kafer (Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2010), 144-161, 156.

representation and are unable to participate in the Church. Could it be because that their presence and they are now bespeaking our tomorrow's reality?

Kristine C. Meneses
University of Santo Tomas
España Blvd, Sampaloc, Manila,
1008 Philippines
kcmeneses@ust.edu.ph