

12 Things to Know About Parishioners with Autism

By Christopher Chan. *Chris was diagnosed with autism at the age of twenty-six when he was earning a doctorate in U.S. History from Marquette University. He recently spoke on issues facing autistic individuals at the 2022 Chesterton Society Conference in Milwaukee. He teaches online and is the author of five books.*

1) What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorders are neurological conditions that affect how people think and respond to certain stimuli. People with autism can have serious trouble connecting with others and communicating. Their behavior is often involuntary. Some people with autism live independent lives, others need lifelong care and assistance. It's a diverse condition that affects people in a wide variety of ways, and an approach to help one autistic person may not work for another autistic person.

We don't know the causes of autism for certain, but previous theories that it was caused by vaccines or neglectful mothering have been debunked.

Autism is NOT consistent amongst everybody who has it. There's a saying that "if you've met one person with autism... you've met one person with autism." Autism manifests itself differently in different people, and the severity and nature of one's reactions differs from person to person, and each person on the autistic spectrum may react differently depending on the time.

2) Autism is not mental illness or neurosis.

Autism is NOT a form of mental illness, and it cannot be "cured." It is a different form of neurological wiring, and though people with autism may need special care and helped by trained psychologists, autism isn't something that can be "fixed." Many autistic people can, however, learn how to cope with their condition better with proper care and assistance. Sometimes autistic children's difficulties fade as they grow older, but not always. Sometimes problems undulate over the course of a lifetime.

It must be noted that autistic people can develop depression, anxiety, and other forms of actual mental illness just like everybody else. Often, feeling isolated and misunderstood can lead to depression. Unfortunately, the brain chemistry of autistic people is often (not always) different from neurotypical people, and certain autistic people respond differently to some medications than others. The side effects can be intense because the medicines may affect the autistic brain in a radically different manner from the average neurotypical person.

3) Discomfort is often unavoidable.

Just as no one can hope to live in a completely perfect world, regrettably, no matter how much effort one puts into helping the autistic, there's no way to create a totally perfect environment that will leave autistic people completely unaffected. Sometimes the best one can do isn't enough. Often it takes trial and error to figure out what works and what doesn't for each specific person. Explaining that this is a learning process for all people involved can be a respectful approach to guidance.

4) "Acting out" is not necessarily deliberate misbehavior

To be clear, autistic children can misbehave, but often their meltdowns and attempts to cope with situations that overstimulate and upset them can be misconstrued. Autistic meltdowns can be mistaken for temper tantrums.

A UK campaign to raise awareness about autistic children's reactions used the tagline, "I'm not naughty. I'm autistic." In these commercials, little sensory triggers such as the scent of perfume, the flash of florescent lighting, constant noise, and being surrounded by strangers caused an autistic child to collapse in tears and screams. This point underscores the need for greater understanding of the autistic experience.

5) Change can be traumatic

We hear the phrase "change is good" a lot. This is not necessarily the case for autistic people, who are often so overwhelmed by their surroundings that they cling to consistency in order to keep their moorings and maintain a sense of stability in a world that seems to shift under their feet constantly. A substitute teacher, a changed hairstyle, a different location, or even a slight disruption in the usual routine can cause an autistic child to respond negatively.

This does *not* mean that everything should be kept as static as possible to accommodate the autistic. It simply means that an upcoming change, like a switch in personnel, a move, or rescheduling can provoke distress. Letting the autistic child in question know about the upcoming change as soon as possible, and explaining that it's unavoidable but how helpful their flexibility on the matter is, can mitigate the situation.

6) Mimicking "neurotypical" behavior is not always possible or even desirable.

It can be exhausting, even crushing, to pretend to be someone that you are not. Pressuring autistic people, especially children, to act in a manner described as "normal" can be

devastating. While guidance on forming friendships and other personal interactions is often necessary and appreciated, forcing autistic people to speak or move or respond in a manner that feels unnatural to them can have harmful effects. Just as trying to correct a limp with a metal brace that is so restrictive it causes muscle damage and torn skin is unhealthy, so is compelling the autistic to adopt a neurological and behavioral corset.

Ultimately, the goal for working with autistic people is not to eliminate their autistic tendencies or to train them to suppress their atypical speech and movement habits. Autistic people should be helped to interact with others and better understand their own reactions and brain chemistry. The goal should be to help autistic people succeed in life and connect better with others while still remaining wholly themselves.

7) People with autism often have very strong moral codes, affecting reactions

Autistic people may enjoy the structure of rules, leading to anger towards those who break them. This can lead to condemnatory behavior, and it can also cause outrage if people aren't "properly punished" (in their eyes) for infractions. This can cause autistic children to be seen as "snitches" by their peers, and adults need to be very cautious about gossiping about other adults' alleged transgressions within the hearing of autistic children— this might lead to some embarrassing confrontations later.

There is no easy solution to this, but it can really help if autistic children have a trusted adult they can turn to in order to discuss their concerns and feelings.

8) Logical answers to questions help.

"Just because" just doesn't work as an explanation. Calm and rational responses, which always show respect to those asking the questions, are more helpful. Sometimes different approaches are necessary to discuss complex topics, ranging from academic subjects to religious matters to social and personal issues. Also, one shouldn't be afraid to say that one needs further time and research in order to answer a question more thoroughly and accurately.

9) Discomfort or unease expressed by the autistic should not be taken personally.

Some autistic people, especially children, may not be aware of the effects that their actions have on other people. They may be distracted by other stimuli, such as noises in the background, something they consider to be "out of order," or even feeling discomfort in the chair in which they are sitting. They may not be able to look others in the eye, or if they are feeling overwhelmed, their ability to communicate may be harmed. Sometimes, some autistic people may feel the need to leave a social situation abruptly, because they feel sick

or otherwise highly uncomfortable. Often, these actions are not meant to be rude, but are meant as a means of self-protection.

Sometimes offense may be given unintentionally. The important thing is to differentiate between the *deliberate* causing of offense and the *inadvertent* causing of offense.

It is often said that the autistic have a poor sense of empathy. In many cases, this is radically unfair and serves to marginalize and even denigrate the autistic. A better description of many autistic people is that *it is more challenging for them to understand how other people think and react differently from them*. That does not mean they are incapable of learning how other people feel and respond, nor does it mean that they do not care. It simply means that often, more effort and innovative methods, ranging from in-depth discussions to reading fiction or watching movies about comparative people and situations, is needed to help the autistic understand other people's thoughts and feelings.

10) Autistic children may need extra care and protection.

Just because the autistic can have heightened awareness of their surroundings, that does not mean that they are conscious of all of the potential dangers threatening them. They may be lost in thought or distracted by stimuli, leaving them unaware of certain threats, like a cyclist or a car coming in their direction. Furthermore, autistic children may be less likely to spot the dangerous attentions of predators. Unsympathetic teachers or misguided therapists can also have damaging effects of autistic children.

11) Autism affects many aspects of Mass attendance and other aspects of religious observance.

Attending Mass can be very stressful for autistic people. The crowds, the sounds, the smells... every sensory experience has an effect on the autistic brain, and it can lead to physiological and mental consequences ranging from meltdowns and "Asperger's moments" to internal distress. Some autistic people may feel or believe to feel heightened contact with the supernatural at Mass, and this can lead to intense reactions.

The overwhelming nature of it all causes many autistic people to abandon religious practices and never come back. Understanding the physical and psychological reactions that contribute to this phenomenon may be able to change the issue. Some autistic people also feel like something's spiritually wrong with them, and there may be despair or resentment over not being able to take part in church activities, and anticipating events such as Sunday Mass can be very stressful. Often understanding *what* is happening inside one's head can mean a great deal of difference to an autistic person's emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being.

12) Special accommodations may need to be made. Not everything can (or should) be changed to help autistic people, but small, separate steps may be taken. Special “autism friendly” masses, or one-on-one conversations can help.

Unfortunately, there’s no way to remove all of the potential stimuli that can overwhelm an autistic person, but there are various ways that situations may be helped. Crowds, sounds, and smells can be critical problems. Occasional “autism friendly” masses with fewer people, disconnected loudspeakers, and limited incense may be more helpful for autistic children, and often faith formation is easier in one-on-one or small group discussions, without being surrounded by their peers.

“Autism friendly” does not mean “one size fits all.” Talking to people, especially children, about what does and doesn’t help them is the only way to find out how they can feel more comfortable (or at least less overwhelmed). Unfortunately, no one knows what will help until something’s been tried.

CONCLUSION

Autistic people are members of the Body of Christ who want to belong and contribute to church life, just like anybody else. They may just need a little more assistance and understanding than most people.