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Cardinal Wuerl gives Communion to a young woman at last fall's White Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew.

Cardinal Wuerl seen as welcoming the gifts of people with disabilities

By **Mark Zimmermann**
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In 2010, the Archdiocese of Washington added another hue to its annual Masses. After its well-established Red Mass for people involved in the administration of justice, Blue Mass for those in law enforcement and public safety, and Rose Mass for those in the

healing professions, the archdiocese launched its White Mass for people with special needs and their family members and friends, choosing the color of baptismal garments to show how all the baptized are part of God's family and are called to carry out His work on Earth.

Celebrating that inaugural White Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle,

Cardinal Donald Wuerl said the Mass honored "the gifts and giftedness of everyone in Christ's Church."

Mary O'Meara – the executive director of the archdiocese's Department of Special Needs Ministries, which sponsors the annual Mass – said, "I think the most inspiring thing about the White Mass is the joy that exudes

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from the community.” She noted that people with intellectual or physical disabilities serve as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, gift bearers and read petitions. “They are active participants in every part of the liturgy. It’s a beautiful opportunity, allowing everyone to share their gifts.”

That spirit of joy is also demonstrated by Cardinal Wuerl at the Mass, O’Meara said, noting it is reflected in his smiles, and how he interacts with the people with special needs. “They feel as though he’s there for them,” she said.

Under Cardinal Wuerl’s leadership, the archdiocese established the Department of Special Needs Ministries in 2009 and instituted the annual Faith, Deafness and Disability Conference, which brings together faith and community groups to help parishes institute best practices for serving people with disabilities, and to help families seeking those programs. “We are the only diocese in the country that has such a comprehensive gathering,” O’Meara said.

The department has also

partnered with Catholic Charities and with Potomac Community Resources – which provides therapeutic, recreational, social and respite care programs for teens and adults with developmental differences – to help start five similar programs at parishes throughout the archdiocese, after the cardinal requested that outreach be replicated.

Cardinal Wuerl also requested that the Department of Special Needs Ministry work to create an adaptive religious education curriculum to support catechists serving children with special needs. The Adaptive Finding God Curriculum for grades 1-8 was created through a joint effort with Loyola Press and is now seen as a national model.

O’Meara said the cardinal is continuing “a culture of welcome and valuing all persons here in the archdiocese... With the cardinal’s support, we have moved from access to belonging for our communities.” The department serves people who are deaf, who have developmental or physical disabilities, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome or

traumatic brain injuries, people with low vision or blindness, and families who have received an unexpected prenatal diagnosis. A key goal, O’Meara said, is “to make sure everyone is part of the life of a parish. No one is an afterthought.”

The greatest blessing of that work, she added, comes “just in meeting Christ in every face we serve and getting to know Him in this beautiful inclusive body of Christ in the archdiocese.”

That vision came to the forefront this past fall at Pope Francis’s Canonization Mass for St. Junípero Serra outside the National Shrine, as Meghan Jones – a young woman with Down syndrome – recited the second reading at the Mass. Hector Reynoso, a parishioner of St. Francis Deaf Catholic Church in Landover Hills, used sign language to read one of the petitions at the papal Mass.

O’Meara said she asked Jones afterward if she was nervous reading for the pope. The young woman, who has participated in the White Mass, recognized Cardinal Wuerl seated nearby, and said she wasn’t nervous at all. “My friend was smiling at me,” she said.