Mental Retardation: The Church’s Neglect and Challenge

NEVER have as many capable people worked more faithfully for the many millions of these least capable as we have seen in the crusade on behalf of the mentally retarded. The developments of the past decade and a half reveal one of the most fantastic episodes in the history of human welfare. Slowly gaining momentum following World War II, the concern of a relatively few specialists became increasingly the concern of many thousands of volunteers who sought through cooperative efforts to assail and conquer one of mankind’s formidable foes.

In the early years of the crusade the campaign conducted by those dedicated volunteers was poorly organized and financed. As the number of volunteers increased the campaigns became disciplined and coordinated. The American Association of Mental Deficiency, with its professional constituents, had long carried the initiative for greater institutional care and research. Progress was slow because the public was apathetic. Then, spontaneously, many groups of parents, who had experienced the tragedy of giving birth to mentally retarded children, began to organize for their own comfort and support. Soon these parents realized that together they had the power to initiate change. These diverse groups were organized into the National Association for Retarded Children. With their headquarters located in New York City, this Association employed an imaginative and disciplined group of professional specialists to direct their crusade for financial support, legislative action, and educational emphasis.

When the parents of the retarded children and the professional specialists joined forces a more vigorous campaign was conducted with greater success. The greatest success of all these efforts was announced on October 17, 1961, when President John F. Kennedy released for publication the names of twenty-four specialists who were to serve on a special committee on mental retardation. This committee met with the President two days later, on October 19, and he reported that the problem of mental retardation demanded national commitment. He asked the committee to report back to him, after
thorough investigation, on a broad new program of research and rehabilitation. Leonard Mayo, the executive director of the Association for the Aid of Crippled Children in New York, was appointed chairman of the committee composed of representatives from the fields of medicine, science, education, psychology, sociology, and law.

All of those who have been a part of the developments in the field of mental retardation, as well as those who have kept an historical eye upon its movement, would agree that an actual reformation has taken place. The accomplishments of the past two decades have probably been greater than all of the prior developments. Of all the significant accomplishments, none has been equal to the change in attitude toward mental retardation. This attitude has been, and still is in many quarters, one of persistent despair and obstinate dedication. These feelings permeated and held court in the citadels of public responsibility for the mentally retarded. What more could be done for those so limited by nature than to care for their needs, and to protect them from either an exploitive society or a rejecting community? Very little more was expected than this. As a result very little was constructively accomplished for many, many years. But now, across the country, has emerged a new, vibrant, and hopeful attitude. The mentally retarded can be helped. Old forms of institutional care are toppling; men and women with renewed vitality and vision are being attracted to labor with and for the mentally retarded. Communities and states are establishing new facilities for education, care, and training.

THOUGH there are limitations (and by virtue of its nature these limitations will always be present) it has become increasingly evident that even our specialists have been "retarded" in their perception of the potentialities of the mentally retarded. The mentally retarded have greater ability than we have given them credit for. They have possibilities of growth and maturation beyond what has heretofore been conceived, and encouraged. The possibilities are neither unlimited nor as limited as formerly considered.

Society has discovered that it also has been "retarded" in its attitude toward the mentally retarded. Now that society is becoming more responsible it will have a more beneficient attitude toward the mentally retarded.

A sure sign of coming of age has been the President's announcement and call to national commitment. This new era does not promise less grief and easier solutions. In fact, the solutions may become more difficult, but the tasks of the future will be easier because of the accomplishments of the past and the dedication of those who were called in earlier, less hopeful, times. The question before us is: "Who will answer the President's call?"

There is little doubt that the research scientists, physicians, social workers, psychologists, educators, and parents will respond. After all, they have pressed for national concern.

In 1957, Charles Kemp, writing in his book The Church: The Gifted and the Retarded Child, said:

The church has not played a prominent part in the movement for the welfare of the retarded... There have been no extensive attempts to study the problem, or to provide guidance for pastors in dealing with the retarded. It is an area that has been largely neglected by religious education, pastoral psychology, and theological training. It is hoped that in the future the church, together with these other areas of education, medicine,