

‘What is the use of access ramps to buildings, if I don’t have access to life?’

These are the words of a disability activist, pointing out a paradox in how disabled people are viewed in our society.

Welcome efforts are made to provide ramps, hearing loops or other aids which help disabled people participate in everyday activities. At the same time, many go to great lengths to stop disabled people being born. Pregnant women are urged to have their unborn babies tested and, if found to be disabled, aborted. Refusal of such eugenic tests often meets with disapproval, rather than support. In Britain, a disabled baby can be aborted legally right up to birth.

The Church takes a radically different stance:

- *Supporting interventions to improve the lives of disabled people.*
- *Calling for those lives to be respected in full.*
- *Insisting that every person, irrespective of age, ability, health, sex or race, has a right to life.*

Every member of the human family — whether a foetus, an infant or an adult — is made in the image of God, and is literally irreplaceable. All people, disabled or able-bodied, have a crucial contribution to make to the life of the Church and the world. In what they say and do, and in their sheer presence, each uniquely testifies to what is precious in God’s eyes, and should be in their neighbours’.

For this and other reasons, the Church rejects not only abortion but also IVF, which can be used to eliminate — at an even earlier stage of life — those who are disabled.

It is standard practice in IVF for multiple embryos to be created in the Petri dish: only those embryos deemed ‘normal’ are transferred to the mother’s womb. Sadly, some couples who are not infertile are also turning to IVF to reduce what is seen as the ‘risk’ of having a disabled child. Those having IVF are encouraged to see embryos as commodities: subject to quality control, and destined for destruction if considered ‘substandard’.

Of course very many parents happily offer unconditional love and welcome to their children after they are born.

But the unconditional welcome of children as gifts from God whether disabled or able-bodied is increasingly undermined particularly, but not only, before birth.

A newborn baby with a disability may also be subjected to lethal discrimination: denied a simple operation, or even food and fluids, because that baby’s life is judged not worth living.

This may also occur later in life, for example, in the case of an older person who has had a stroke. If the aim in withholding a medical procedure is precisely to make the person die, this is euthanasia: an indefensible act of aggression against an innocent human being.

The Church cherishes life

The Church teaches that all human lives, marked as they are in diverse ways by suffering as well as joy, are to be valued, celebrated, cherished and respected. This is no less true if the person has a disability which causes him or her some unavoidable and, perhaps, significant suffering. As people in this situation and their carers often emphasise, suffering can and does coexist with a life that is profoundly valuable — both in itself and in what that person can achieve.