The international *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which Australia ratified on 17 July 2008, was enacted to promote and protect the dignity and the rights of people with disability.

The Convention is built on the principles, contained in the United Nations *Charter*, that have underpinned the development of the international human rights framework since the Second World War: namely, the inherent dignity and worth of all members of the human family, and their equal and inalienable rights. It extends the full enjoyment of these rights to persons with disabilities.¹

The convention is also built on a ‘social model of disability’. This distinguishes between impairments – be they physical, mental or intellectual – and disability. It is not impairments themselves, but interaction with attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder full participation in society.

Our attitudes, and the social and physical environments that we build, are thus of central importance to the wellbeing and inclusion of people with disability.

**Complementing the Convention**, the United Nations annually proclaims 3 December as ‘INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY’, to promote an understanding of disability issues, and action to support the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities.

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It is easy to dismiss International Days, conventions, and the like, or to be cynical about them. They can seem far removed from the issues that seem important in our lives.

But disability issues should be close to our hearts.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, four million people in Australia (equal to 18.5% of the population) reported having a disability in 2009. (In this survey, disability was defined as ‘any limitation, restriction or impairment which restricts everyday activities and has lasted or is likely to last for at least six months.’) 1.3 million people (5.8%) had severe limitation in the core activities of communication, mobility and self-care.

A further 760,000 Australians (3.5%) were primary carers; that is, people who provided the majority of the informal help needed by a person with a disability or aged 60 years and over. 12% of Australians provided some care.

1 That is not to say that all aspects of UN human rights enactments are in reality in accordance with these principles. For example, despite the many helpful and positive aspects of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the Vatican has not signed it because of ambiguity in its call for provision of ‘reproductive health services.’
People with disability and their carers are integral members of Catholic communities – the proportion of people with disability and of carers is broadly the same within Catholic communities as it is for Australians generally.

And we face many of the same challenges that are faced by the broader community: how to ensure that our attitudes, and the environments that we create, are inclusive of people with disability.

As Christians, though, we face these challenges in a different way. The love of neighbour that is so central to the Gospel calling extends to all, and, as the Australian Bishops reminded us last year, ‘parish communities need every person to be part of the worshipping body. A Parish is not complete or whole unless it includes, nurtures and rejoices in each of its members.’

Further, as we read in the Letter to the Romans:

> Just as each of us has various parts in one body, and the parts do not all have the same function: in the same way, all of us, though there are so many of us, make up one body in Christ, and as different parts we are all joined to one another. (Romans 12: 4-6)

For some years now the Australian Bishops have encouraged parishes to build on the International Day of People with Disability; to use the Sunday nearest that day to celebrate the contribution of people with disability, and to reflect on what more can be done to achieve that inclusiveness, recognition and support that are the features of a true community.

The Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life have prepared material again this year – it can be accessed at www.catholic.org.au. This can be drawn on to help a parish focus on building awareness and sustainable inclusion.

In presenting this material, the Commission draws on the renowned spiritual write, Henri Nouwen, to focus our thoughts and endeavours:

> The question is not “How can we help people with disability?” The much more important question is, “How can we allow people with disability to give their spiritual gifts to us and call us to conversion, call us to wholeness, call us to love?”

We are called at a personal level, and as worshipping communities, to reach out to all members of our community. One aspect of this engagement can be as part of the broader political community.

Work continues towards the development in Australia of a National Disability Insurance Scheme, to address with justice the individualised needs of Australians who have a permanent, severe disability.

But progress is patchy. Individuals, Parish groups, etc can support the full development of this scheme through the website www.everyaustraliancounts.com.au.

Denis Fitzgerald, 5 November 2012

(Graphic from Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life)