

A Calendar of Daily Lenten Prayers to Realize Autism's Belonging in the Body of Christ

Introduction: Jesus, Re-member Us!

Lent necessarily evokes a certain imagery of journey: a voluntary withdrawal to a place of self-scrutiny to shed habits acquired from the world's false theology of power, utility, and convenience, followed by a going forth with new resolve and better understanding of God's intended Way. We often refer to this as a pilgrimage to the desert, evoking the literal path taken by Our Lord (and Israel before him) dedicated to prayer, self-emptying and preparation for the mission ahead. Desert life is likewise well-suited to pilgrimage, in that there are few places of concealment. The bright, hot sun starkly exposes who we are and what we carry with us, including aspects of ourselves and our habits which we might prefer stay hidden in our interior shadows; yet we soon realize the necessity of letting go of superfluous cargo if we are to survive the journey. Likewise, the desert's vast stretches of isolation provide an environment free of diversions which might delay our reckoning. And then, the scarcity of resources reminds us unambiguously of our utter dependence on God, as well as the needs and interdependence of every member of the Body – both literally in our own physiology, and figuratively in our reliance on mutual support within our communities.

For many autistic people, we are already in the desert. We are isolated, hungry, thirsty, and out of range of communication. We send signals, we explain our needs, we offer our services – but we are not seen, heard, or understood. It very much feels like involuntary exile without a clear or valid reason.

This experience is not unique to autistic people; indeed, the Church itself knows what it feels like to be excluded and isolated from secular society. In similar fashion, the Church communicates the Gospel message in many ways, yet is often not heard or understood. Nobody would argue that the Church is neither valued by contemporary society nor has much influence on public policy or cultural mores. It would be fair to say that the Church today finds itself in a very similar place as regards the secular world as autistic people. Wouldn't it seem, then, that the experience of autistic people – who are very familiar with this sort of desert living – might be a great asset, and a source of wisdom, to the Church as a whole?

Unfortunately, autistic people are not only exiles from the cult of normalcy at large in the world. We are equally marginalized within the Church, the Body of Christ, by leaders who routinely ascribe to and apply the same standards as those held by that same secular cult of normalcy. A glance through our previous blog posts bears this out all too abundantly. To be fair, there are numerous parishes and dioceses who do take an active interest in supporting neurodivergent needs, and for these, we are truly grateful. We are not suggesting that the landscape is completely barren or bleak. We are, however, painfully aware that there are still many wounds yet to

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be healed, and many members of the Body who remain in exile from parishes, dioceses and communities who do not see the need to respond. It is to these communities we especially extend this invitation: Join us, this Lent, in our desert. And, to those who are already supporting neurodivergent members in the Body of Christ, as well as all our neurodivergent members far and wide: please, strengthen the Body for this journey with your prayers, too!

The following calendar serves as a map for such a journey. Each Lenten Day offers a prayer petition for pilgrims to draw ever closer to those of us who wait in hope for recognition, for reconciliation, and for our gifts and presence to be found acceptable by the rest of the Body.

On the Cross, the Good Thief – himself an exile from the community – made this prayer: “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.” This Lent, we ask Jesus to re-member us... to restore the exiled parts of His Body with circulation and nourishment and belonging.

Jesus promises “where two or more gather in My Name, I am there among them.” Be assured that this prayer calendar is being prayed by us here at Autism Consecrated. Whoever joins us in our prayer is united with us in Christ, and becomes a vital part of naming – and healing – the unfortunate effects of indifference, misunderstanding and outdated approaches to neurodiversity. May we pray together: JESUS, RE-MEMBER US!

- Aimée O’Connell, T.O.Carm., and Rev. Mark P. Nolette

Further reading

Waldock, K.E. and Sango, P.N. (2023): Autism, faith and churches: The research landscape and where we go next. *Autism and Faith*, Vol. 20, No. 1. Retrieved on 2/2/24 from <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/article/view/2578/1982>.

Prayer calendar follows.

February 14-17 Ash Wednesday, and days following

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
11	12	13	<p>14</p> <p>ASH WEDNESDAY</p> <p>We pray that the Church may humbly recognize where we fall short in supporting our autistic members, and where there are wounds which need to be healed.</p>	<p>15</p> <p>We pray that the Church may grow aware of the subtle ways autism is stigmatized. May we be forgiven for the wounds caused by perpetuating stereotypes which are inaccurate and unhelpful.</p>	<p>16</p> <p>We pray that the Church may see autistic social, emotional, and cognitive processing as a functional design with its own gifts and challenges, equal in dignity to those who experience and process the human condition neurotypically. May we be forgiven for the wounds caused by viewing autism as pathology.</p>	<p>17</p> <p>We pray that the Church may turn away from outdated and harmful suggestions that our autistic members should mask or replace neurodivergent traits. May we grow in empathy toward the experience of our autistic members, seeking healing and reconciliation for the wounds we may have caused.</p>

February 18-24 First Week of Lent

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>18 We pray this week for an increase in empathy toward the experience of our autistic members.</p> <p>May we embrace a spirit of humility, repentance, and curiosity as we seek to grow in what we do not yet comprehend, and heal wounds caused by a lack of understanding.</p>	<p>19 We pray that the Church may comprehend the wide and variable range of autistic communication needs (including verbal and auditory processing, intermittent mutism, and alternatives to speaking): how these influence our spiritual, social, and emotional experiences, and how to be more supportive of these needs.</p>	<p>20 We pray that the Church may comprehend the wide and variable range of autistic sensory needs (including lighting, sound, temperature, motion, visual environment, ambient scents, etc.): how these influence our spiritual, social, and emotional experiences, and how to be more supportive of these needs.</p>	<p>21 We pray that the Church may comprehend executive functioning challenges (i.e., processing slowdown and overload from too much information at once, coupled with performance pressure from others) and how to be more supportive of these needs.</p>	<p>22 We pray that the Church may grow in understanding the physical differences autistic people often experience, such as joint hypermobility, dyspraxia, and dysautonomia. May the Church find ways to support the needs of these and other “invisible” conditions which make ordinary physical activities difficult, painful and exhausting.</p>	<p>23 We pray that the Church may comprehend the experiences of rejection sensitivity (<i>RSD – an intense panic reflex toward the possibility of offending others</i>) and demand anxiety (<i>PDA – a shutdown reflex in response to performance pressure, related to executive functioning</i>). May we seek ways of being patient and supportive when these needs are present, rather than critical or dismissive.</p>	<p>24 We pray that the Church may comprehend alexithymia (the inability to process and express emotions as quickly as neurotypical people) and its influence on participation. May we respect the validity of individual differences in emotional processing.</p>

February 25 – March 2 Second Week of Lent

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>25 We pray this week that the Church may comprehend and appreciate the presence of our autistic members, especially those who are not readily seen, heard, or recognized. May we seek healing for the wounds caused by indifference and unawareness.</p>	<p>26 We pray that the Church may recognize that there are autistic members in nearly every community, and that many do not have the benefit of formal diagnosis. May we never assume anyone is or is not autistic.</p>	<p>27 We pray for the autistic laity in the Church: newborns, infants, children, teenagers, adults, and senior citizens. May we recognize and value their presence.</p>	<p>28 We pray for our autistic members who are not able to participate in Church liturgies and activities. May our autistic members be genuinely missed when absent.</p>	<p>29 We pray for all autistic bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, vowed religious, and all autistic individuals in vocational formation and discernment. May we support and welcome their neurodiversity.</p>	<p>1 We pray that the Church may offer hope and healing to our autistic members who feel chronically rejected and scrutinized for being different.</p>	<p>2 We pray that the Church may take overt steps to invite autistic people to partake in the RCIA process. May we support and welcome their neurodiversity.</p>

March 3 – 9 Third Week of Lent

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>3 We pray this week for insight into where we can make the Church more accessible to, and more supportive of, our autistic members.</p> <p>May we seek forgiveness for the times we have allowed fear and pride to limit our generosity, creativity, and hospitality.</p>	<p>4 We pray for insight into how to make liturgies more accessible to our autistic members, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>5 We pray for insight into how to make all the Sacraments more accessible to our autistic members, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>6 We pray for insight into how to make faith formation and sacramental preparation more accessible to our autistic members, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>7 We pray for insight into how to make youth ministry more accessible to our autistic members, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>8 We pray for insight into how to make social ministries, retreats, parish missions and days of recollection more accessible to our autistic members, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>9 We pray that all Parish Councils will strive to better support and include our autistic members in pastoral and spiritual initiatives, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>

March 10 – 16 Fourth Week of Lent

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>10 We pray this week for insight into how the Church can lead the wider community by providing support and accessibility to our autistic members.</p> <p>May we seek forgiveness for the times we have allowed fear, pride, and upholding the status quo to limit our generosity, creativity, and hospitality.</p>	<p>11 We pray that the bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, and vowed religious of every Diocese will strive to better support and include our autistic members in pastoral and spiritual initiatives seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>12 We pray that the Knights of Columbus in every parish will strive to better support and include our autistic members in fraternal and spiritual initiatives, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>13 We pray that all religious orders, and lay associations of the faithful, will strive to better support and include our autistic members in their communities and initiatives, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>14 We pray that all Catholic seminaries will strive to better support and include our autistic members in their communities and initiatives, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>15 We pray that all Catholic institutions of learning (elementary schools, high schools, colleges and universities, campus ministries and Newman Centers) will strive to better support and include our autistic members in their communities and initiatives, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>	<p>16 We pray that all Catholic hospitals, clinics, health care providers and community service providers will strive to better support and include our autistic members in their communities and initiatives, seeking to heal the wounds where access has been impeded or denied.</p>

March 17 – 23 Fifth Week of Lent

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>17 We pray this week that the Church may grow in recognizing and encouraging the particular mission of the autistic members of the Body of Christ.</p>	<p>18 We pray that the Church may promote a culture of neurodiversity among all members.</p>	<p>19 We pray that the Church will discover and embrace the ways in which our autistic members demonstrate and cultivate discipleship.</p>	<p>20 We pray that the Church may extend invitations and opportunities for leadership roles to our autistic members.</p>	<p>21 We pray that the Church will outwardly demonstrate how striving to make the Church more accessible to our autistic members benefits everyone.</p>	<p>22 We pray that the Church will look to our autistic members for guidance and suggestions on how to maintain accessibility and regular participation in all aspects of Church life.</p>	<p>23 We pray that the Church may designate one or more saint(s) as patrons and examples for our autistic members.</p>

March 24 – 31 (Holy Week, Triduum and Easter)

Palm Sunday	Monday of Holy Week	Tuesday of Holy Week	Wednesday of Holy Week	Holy Thursday	Good Friday	Holy Saturday
<p>24 We pray this week for healing, forgiveness, and the grace to continue building on the progress we have made in better understanding and supporting our autistic members.</p>	<p>25 Placing all our trust in God Our Father, we pray that the Church may not fear scarcity of resources in offering hospitality and belonging to our autistic members.</p>	<p>26 Placing all our trust in God Our Father, we pray that the Church may turn away from reliance on numbers to justify initiatives supporting our autistic members, especially remembering Luke 15:4 and Matthew 18:20.</p>	<p>27 As we reflect on Jesus’ betrayal by Judas, may we embrace a spirit of repentance for any time we have allowed convenience, popular opinion, fear, or jealousy to influence how we respond to our autistic members.</p>	<p>28 As Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, we pray for an increase in the same spirit of self-giving love toward the autistic members of the Body of Christ.</p>	<p>29 We adore You, O Christ, and we praise You; because, by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world. May our wounds be united with Yours, and may we stand by You in those members who have been wounded.</p>	<p>30 We wait in hope for Christ to make all things new. We entrust to Him all of our Lenten resolutions.</p>

31 Easter Sunday

We give thanks for the grace of Christ’s Resurrection, and the outpouring of His Love upon the world! May we live and walk in newness of life as we embrace and embody our Lenten resolutions!