



ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

September 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last month, I had the privilege of leading a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France, where 150 years ago, Our Lady appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous. Lourdes is the most visited Christian shrine in the world and attracts over six million people each year. Many come to pray for physical and spiritual healing and countless miracles have been attributed to Our Lady of Lourdes' intercession.

One of the more striking aspects about a visit to Lourdes is the way in which people with disabilities and illnesses are accommodated. As one of our priests told a newspaper reporter, Lourdes is a place where they are "the VIPs." Those with special needs are cared for in every way imaginable, and they are given places of honor at each Mass and at every liturgical gathering.

Here at home, we can do our own part to make people of all abilities feel welcome in our parishes. The *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors* initiative asks us to reach out to affirm and include those with varying physical, cognitive, and sensory abilities so that they will feel welcome. As someone who often has a hard time walking, I can attest from personal experience how important it is to make participation and access possible.

On Sunday, September 28, parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago will observe *Inclusion Awareness Day*. It should serve as a reminder to us of the blessings received when all people are purposefully included in the day-to-day life and ministry of the Church.

Please join me in celebrating *Inclusion Awareness Day*. If your parish is unable to participate on September 28, please set aside another weekend to reflect and learn about this issue. Thank you for opening your own hearts, minds, and doors so that all those to whom God has given the gift of life may share their gifts, not only on *Inclusion Awareness Day*, but every day of the year.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Chicago