The parents of a 3-month-old recently wrote to The Washington Post food critic’s online chat to ask about dining etiquette in a city where many restaurants are inaccessible to strollers. The critic responded by complaining about “strollers the size of Zipcars,” but then admitted he wasn’t the parent of an infant and invited readers to discuss the topic. Reader comments varied and expanded the topic to include people who use walkers. The chat provided much food for thought on the many ways that we can welcome those whom others might consider burdensome while we are out and about at restaurants, churches, parks, on transportation, and in public. Our loving welcome may help others soften their hearts and change attitudes toward families with young or elderly members.

The first commenter suggested that parents eat at off-peak hours to avoid “consternation” from fellow diners. As hard enough as it is to raise children in a city, are we now asking parents to eat dinner out with children only from 2 to 5:00 p.m.? Perhaps as fellow diners we could be patient and understanding and help when we see a parent struggling with a stroller or a temperamental child. Or suggest that a restaurant have a secure place to stow strollers and walkers.

Recall God’s creation of each of us “in His image” (Gen. 1:27), meaning that every one of us is made to be in loving relationship with others. Even the smallest community of love, sometimes as small as two people, mirrors the Divine Trinity. Members of a loving community patiently accommodate one another’s needs.

My parish during high school displayed this loving acceptance each week as everyone kindly greeted my grandmother making her slow but steady way into church with her walker. On the other hand, I’ve been present at Mass when a priest stopped during a homily and asked a parent to take a slightly noisy child out of the church.

How we treat the defenseless and vulnerable among us not only impacts our salvation, but also sends a powerful message to those around us. Our acceptance of others can bear witness to their very existence as God’s gift. By our attentiveness and loving assistance, we proclaim that the person in front of us, no matter how young, frail or in need of assistance, is an unrepeatable and precious creation from God. And in turn, we grow in character and virtue each time we choose to sacrifice for another.

So, ask yourself, how accessible is my parish to strollers and wheelchairs? Could we install a wheelchair ramp or elevator to be more welcoming to the elderly or disabled? Is there a place to safely stow walkers or canes? Are there diaper changing tables in women’s and men’s restrooms? Or accommodations for parents to participate in the Mass as much as possible if their children become distracting? Perhaps I could smile understandingly when I see a mother and her crying child walking down the airplane aisle toward me, instead of silently praying that they’re not seated next to me. Or learn to be more grateful for the gift of children and families being present in our celebration of the Eucharist.
Through better accommodations, but more importantly, through open hearts and loving attitudes, we can build up a culture that truly welcomes every life in all situations—even a situation as seemingly insignificant as accommodating stroller storage in a crowded restaurant.

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