“These Are Our Saints”

A Lourdes Shrine, the St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children, and the Catholic Remaking of Cognitive Disability

ANDREW WALKER-CORNETTA

Introduction

About halfway between Madison and Milwaukee, not far off Highway 18, sits a modest Marian shrine. A Lourdes replica, one of many “mimetic grottoes” in the United States, it consists of a pile of farmyard stones that hold an illuminated statue of the Virgin, a small iron fence draped with rosaries, and a shrouded St. Bernadette figure kneeling with her face lifted. It juts out like a molar from the surrounding countryside, but might easily be missed, tucked as it is behind a huddle of large, shuttered buildings.¹

Those buildings composed the campus of the now-closed St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children, once perhaps the most celebrated institution in North America for persons with cognitive disabilities. Founded by Milwaukee’s Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi at the outset of the twentieth century in Jefferson, Wisconsin, St. Coletta’s eventually became a lode-star for parents, priests, politicians, and others who were in search of answers to what one of the school’s early leaders dubbed the “challenge of the retarded child.”² By 1955, the school boasted a 700-acre campus, where more than five hundred residents (ranging from six years old to over sixty) were meant to be transformed into “useful” citizens and community members through labor, learning, and spiritual formation. A decade later, the reputation of the school (as well as its extensions in Chicago and Boston) was bolstered when its leaders received the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation’s Service Award, a national honor recognizing excellence in disability-related research and treatment.³ That recognition coincided with an influx of funding and attention in popular media such that, for much of the second half of the twentieth century, “St. Coletta’s” was, for many, synonymous with the progressive treatment of the “mentally handicapped.”

This chapter takes this institution’s Lourdes shrine as a focusing lens for exploring the larger history of U.S. Catholic engagements with cognitive
disability. It situates the school’s grotto within mid-twentieth-century public discourse about intellectual impairment and provides a unique look at how Marian devotional grammars informed efforts to make sense of those marked as “exceptional.” 

Examining St. Coletta’s leaders’ use and representations of the grotto on their campus and the broader memory of Lourdes, this chapter offers a discussion of how said leaders, alongside a growing collection of clergy, educators, and parents, worked to orient their peers around cognitive disability as a crucial site of religious activity and identification. This chapter suggests that St. Coletta’s shrine distinctively incarnates many aspects of this growing group’s efforts and, as such, provides a valuable opportunity for exploring both the making of U.S. Catholicism and the mid-century making of cognitive disability.

**Remembering “Forgotten” Children**

The postwar U.S. witnessed a significant cultural reckoning in relation to cognitive disability. In reaction to early-twentieth-century alarms about the “menace of the feeble-minded” and broader ideas that regarded persons with cognitive impairments as sources of social shame, an emergent group of largely white, middle-class parents and their allies set about transforming public attitudes surrounding this population. They hoped to mark a shift from fear and derision to affection and accommodation. This was an attempt, as it was frequently framed, to remember “forgotten children” within homes, communities, and the nation.

Such efforts took a variety of shapes. Some focused on questions of etiology and the work of detaching these forms of difference from explicitly eugenic associations with heredity. Shifts in scientific interpretations of many conditions’ origins, accompanied by the public disclosures of several celebrities that they were the parents of children with cognitive impairments, worked to establish the argument that such persons could be born into “any family”—a formulation that was ubiquitous in magazines, memoirs, and newspapers throughout the 1950s. This insistence helped to reassure families comfortably situated within the United States’ racial and class hierarchies that their association with such conditions need not jeopardize their social identities. It guaranteed that one could have a child with cognitive impairment and still be recognized as a “nice, average American.”
Another shape that the postwar “remaking of intellectual disability” took, to use the historian James Trent’s phrase, was the insistence upon persons with cognitive disabilities’ economic and educational potential. This was concisely conveyed in the motto for the National Association for Retarded Children (NARC, formed in 1950), which eventually came to be one of the most influential lobbying groups in the country. The group insisted: “The Retarded Can Be Helped.” This slogan, printed on billboards, newspaper advertisements, and trumpeted on radio spots, was meant to counter what was a still common suggestion that persons deemed “mentally handicapped” were, by definition, “hopeless.” Against this consensus, parents and their peers set about demonstrating that many persons with cognitive impairments could in fact contribute to a broader economic and social world if provided with the right opportunities.7

There was a third avenue for this “remaking.” However, it was decidedly more improvisational than the previous two sets of claims. It entailed efforts to establish the social value of persons with cognitive impairments apart from—or against—questions of labor and academic potential. Whereas the insistence that such persons “can be helped” was tied—directly and indirectly—to the promise of labor and productivity, parents and their allies also ventured a host of claims about the social worth of this population in arenas that were imagined to be distinct from the economic: those that related to religious faith, love, and moral progress.

One finds these claims especially prominent in parent testimonies from the period that strove to highlight the leavening effects of such persons when it came to their family members’ piety and character. Parents like the celebrity Dale Evans Rogers touted how her daughter, Robin, made her siblings more “thoughtful” and “unselfish,” while making her and her husband (the Hollywood star Roy Rogers) more avid in their evangelical commitments. The author and educator Willard Abraham described how his daughter, Barbara, humbled him, “shak[ing] him out of a complacency” that had left him inattentive to his own life and the suffering of others. Such personal testimony made the case that persons with cognitive impairments should be regarded as social assets that spurred others into more authentic and virtuous ways of being in the world.8

U.S. Catholics, although largely absent from existing histories, were involved and invested in every facet of the postwar “remaking” of cognitive disability. Catholic leaders joined their peers in contesting narrowly
hereditarian interpretations of such forms of difference, affirming (at least in terms of biology) their “accidental” origins. Through educational and research programs, Catholic clergy, women religious, and others promoted new means for proving and cultivating this population’s academic and economic abilities. Catholic residential schools like St. Coletta’s and other day schools proliferated, while Catholic colleges and universities developed programs to train special educators, vocational rehabilitators, and other “mental deficiency” specialists. At the heart of these diverse engagements, however, was an insistence upon the spiritual significance and treatment of this population: their value relative to eternal questions and economies. That insistence saturated the growing body of Catholic commentary on the “exceptional child” as it emerged in Catholic periodicals, parents’ memoirs, and advice manuals. Such claims helped to hail and recommend U.S. Catholics as a community uniquely sensitive to these forms of difference.⁹

A Hermeneutic of Cognitive Impairment

The Lourdes replica at St. Coletta’s School for Exceptional Children in Wisconsin had a host of resources built into it for assigning spiritual value to persons who were otherwise classified in terms of “deficiency.” The first among them had to do with what we might think of as an existing Catholic hermeneutic of cognitive disability, one that was basic to the story of Lourdes but certainly not exclusive to it.

As the historian Ruth Harris explains in her panoramic history of the Virgin’s appearance to the young Bernadette Soubirous in the French countryside in 1858 and its memory, much of the credibility and purchase of the story of Lourdes has depended upon the suggestion that Bernadette was, in some sense, cognitively impaired. Accounts of her contemporaries were replete with assessments of her as “ignorant,” “simple,” and “slow.” While Harris notes that such appraisals functioned in part to guarantee against the possibility of the young woman’s duplicity, they also functioned to situate Bernadette within existing Catholic frameworks for esteeming vulnerability and difference.¹⁰

Those frameworks posited an inverse relationship between one’s capacity for participating in the demands of social life and one’s relation to holiness. Figures who were understood to be unable to engage in various
kinds of conduct (e.g., sexual, economic, and intellective) were regarded as especially conducive when it came to supernatural communication. Within this paradigm, what Harris describes as Bernadette’s assigned “ignorance and marginality” were crucial to her availability to the Virgin and her messages. Her impairment (whatever its origins) surfaced in narrative accounts of her life as a kind of exfoliate that guaranteed that she accrued none of the worldly sediments that might have impeded the movement of the divine in her life.\(^1\)

Such notions, Harris explains, took on a special force in the context of nineteenth-century France, reinforcing juxtapositions between the putative dangers of the modern and an imperiled tradition. Bernadette’s purported deficits—and their resonance with other imagined dimensions of her identity—child, girl, rural, and poor—allowed her to stand for what Harris describes as a “world uncontaminated by materialism and secularism.” Cognitive limitation provided a powerful means to name what worried one about the age.\(^2\)

Ideas about Bernadette’s “slowness” traveled with memories of Lourdes to the twentieth-century U.S. in narrative as well as ritual objects. In novena prayer manuals and ten-cent pamphlets like the 1948 *Bernadette of Lourdes*, Bernadette’s exemplary holiness was communicated through notions of diminution and impairment. The authors of such texts worked to establish this young woman’s status as “the lowliest implement” by which God might communicate with the world and did so through descriptions of her as “unlettered,” “simple . . . [and] unimaginative,” or, as her neighbors branded her in the popular 1943 film, *The Song of Bernadette*, simply, “stupid.” Such word stock was fundamental to her all-but-ubiquitous veneration among postwar Catholics.\(^3\)

It was with these representations at hand that U.S. Catholics waded into the mid-century “remaking” of cognitive disability. The leaders of places like St. Coletta’s, parent-advocates, and others marshaled the connections that the story of Lourdes and others posited between cognitive impairment and holiness to celebrate persons with cognitive disabilities as emblems of Catholic piety. St. Coletta’s chaplain, the Rev. James Feider (who authored the first U.S. Catholic catechism for persons with cognitive impairments), gave voice to this at the National Catholic Educational Association’s 1952 conference. In a paper titled “The Spiritual Potential of the Mentally Deficient Child,” Feider explained to attendees, ““The limitations of the
mentally deficient very naturally obviate any undue attachment to the mundane.” Such persons’ supposed inability to compete with their peers left them “free and unencumbered in their spiritual life,” he opined, and, therefore, “adamant in their faith in God.”

As was true in Bernadette’s case, such appraisals were meant to stand out against the backdrop of troubling times. One anonymous mother, in an essay for the Catholic magazine *Integrity*, offered a description similar to Feider’s of her “mentally defective” child’s faith and praised it as a re-buke to what she dubbed “the irreligion and materialism of a world in which he would never move.” Others criticized the times in which they found themselves in different genres, as illustrated in a poem reproduced in the priest Gerard Breitenbeck’s pamphlet *For Parents of Retarded Children*. Rhetorically inquiring about the advantages of the cognitively impaired person’s life when contrasted with the social ambitions of the seemingly “unexceptional” individual, the speaker asks:

> Is it so tragic to live out one’s life,  
> Free from the worry of struggle and strife?  
> Free from the gnawing of envy and greed?  
> Free from the desire to fill every need?  
> To show the world we’re so big and so smart,  
> To spend all our time just playing a part  
> For which perhaps we’re not even fitted?  

Such representations of “exceptional” individuals’ credulity and social detachment communicated to Catholic audiences that they were already in possession of idioms to appreciate this population, that there was space for them within their tradition. Such persons could be embraced, many suggested, like Bernadette, as icons of pure religion and as vehicles for voicing one’s longing to transcend this world, its corruptions, and accruing pressures.

### Staging Sainthood

St. Coletta’s replica grotto helped to make these ideas material. It furnished resources for the performance of students’ kinship with a holy figure like Bernadette and their value within the broader universe of Catholic devotionalism. Sometimes the performance of these connections was announced
as a performance. As part of the school’s curriculum, and in ways that were consistent with Catholic enthusiasm for dramaturgy at mid-century, students at St. Coletta regularly reenacted the story of Lourdes for peers, parents, and broader audiences. With plenty of competition and envy, no doubt, a young girl would be cast in the role of Bernadette, charged with enfleshing the stone statue that many audience members regularly encountered on the school’s campus. In doing so, this child assumed the task of personifying the purity of faith that was supposed to characterize everyone who shared her diagnosis.¹⁸

This was, however, not the only way that St. Coletta’s leaders staged their students. Residents could also demonstrate their occupation of a “free and unencumbered” spiritual life by simply engaging the shrine as a site of devotional practice. On regular visits to pray the Rosary and on feast days, the grotto could be used to highlight what many mid-century Catholics claimed was this population’s “uncanny sense of religion.”¹⁹

What distinguished the shrine from other devotional sites on the school’s campus was its function as place of interposition. Unlike the chapel and many of the other shrines that populated the institution, one of the affordances of a Lourdes grotto was that students and others could position themselves alongside Bernadette in her communication with the Virgin. Its form as a tableau joined devotees with Bernadette as recipients of the Blessed Mother’s confidence. In some sense, it invited individuals to enter the scene as the young girl, in a similar pose of receptivity.

That affordance had photographic advantages. For example, in one black-and-white image, reproduced in a postwar prospectus published for the institutions’ benefactors, community members, parents, and a group of students stand in front of the grotto at the right of the frame. A collection of ten boys—perhaps the residents of one of the school’s many “cottages” or the members of a catechism class—are dressed in starched white shirts tucked into slacks. They appear to be looking intently at the statue of the Virgin who is held between stones several feet off the ground. On the left side of the image, the figure of Bernadette kneels, whose colorless brightness against the grey of the grotto and grass rhymes with the students’ shirts, as does her upward gaze with theirs.

This image helped to turn Bernadette and this collection of students into mirror images of one another. By manifesting a small congress of devotees in the countryside, it helped to make accessible the connections
between the hermeneutic of cognitive disability that structured accounts of Bernadette’s devotion and St. Coletta’s students. It provided evidence for—a means to see and to feel—such persons’ “adamant faith.” As we will see, in doing so, it also buttressed arguments mid-century Catholics were making about places like St. Coletta’s and their positions within broader social and sacred landscapes.

**Exceptional Geographies**

The postwar era witnessed mounting criticism of large, mostly state-run institutions for persons with psychiatric and cognitive impairments. Parents, advocates, and activists (including the members of the aforementioned NARC) eagerly pursued alternatives to such places’ “custodial”—and often carceral—conditions. In this context, new and established Catholic residential schools sought to distinguish themselves by emphasizing how their work was motivated by regard for the spiritual potential of people with cognitive disabilities. Unlike their public counterparts, many
Catholics assumed and suggested, the operation of their institutions was predicted on the value of the cognitively impaired individual. Catholic leaders described their institutions as places that presumed their residents’ “inherent dignity” by virtue of their “supernatural destiny” and possession of souls. Many took for granted that these motivating premises led to better care.²¹

Even persons who might not otherwise be in favor of children’s incorporation into Catholic ritual could be heartened by the religious orientation of a place like St. Coletta’s. John Frank, a Jewish lawyer in Bloomington, Indiana, recounted a discussion with his Protestant doctor in his 1951 memoir, My Son’s Story, in which the latter praised Catholic schools for cognitively disabled individuals. Encouraging Frank to delegate his child’s care to St. Rita’s Home in Buffalo, New York, which was operated by the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Felix, he averred, “[Catholic institutions] usually do a very good job. . . . Your own peace of mind will be greater if your child’s care is entrusted to someone who sincerely believes that the spirit of God is in that child.” Frank soon enrolled his son at St. Rita’s.²²

St. Coletta’s Lourdes shrine was one among many ways to telegraph the kind of “belief” that Frank’s doctor named and in which many parents took comfort. It could function—as alongside images of First Communions, crucifixes, and religious—as a kind of promissory note, a guarantee of feeling and commitment.

For fellow Catholics, reminders of St. Coletta’s religious orientation provided additional comfort and confidence. One could find the cultivation of such trust in a stone relief on the exterior wall of the school’s central chapel that depicted three haloed angels, ten feet tall behind three small children. Each angel extended a hand onto the children before them in gestures of restraint and guidance.²³ This sort of imagery invited parents to imagine St. Coletta’s students in the custody of not only sisters and priests who believed in the “spirit of God” within their charges but also in the care of far more powerful beings. Depictions and knowledge of the school’s Lourdes shrine no doubt served similar functions. They invited a student’s mother or other family members to remind themselves that placing their loved one at St. Coletta’s might be understood as a unique way of enfolding them into the protection and affection of the Mother of God.²⁴

The shrine helped to mark the uniqueness of St. Coletta’s on yet another front. The grotto’s function as a site of interposition and devotional
practice helped to animate a claim that was increasingly a mainstay of mid-century Catholic discourse surrounding persons with cognitive disabilities—namely, that members of this population were saints. Such persons did not only represent qualities associated with holiness (simplicity, innocence, etc.), but they ought to be recognized and addressed as uniquely powerful spiritual agents within a wider devotional universe. Chaplain Rev. Feider hedged his bets slightly by frequently referring to St. Coletta’s residents as “the most probable saints of God” (this phrase was etched in marble in the school’s administration building), but many of his peers saw less need for caution. Sr. John Minetta, a mid-century leader of a religious educational program for people with cognitive disabilities in California, referred to persons labeled accordingly as “born” and “ready-made saints.” San Francisco’s diocesan newspaper the Monitor was equally bold when a postwar headline informed its readers: “Mentally Deficient Children: These Are Our Saints.”

Those in charge at St. Coletta’s advertised and mobilized this (probable) sainthood to turn others’ attention to their institution as a special locus of holiness. The school’s first superintendent, Sr. M. Anastasia, once announced, after learning the school would be permitted to have daily exposition of the eucharist for an extended period, that “[the] prayers of the innocent [i.e., her students] are bound to win untold graces and blessings for us, our parents, friends and benefactors.” The prospect of “graces won” was constantly put before readers of the institution’s quarterly newspaper and others to recruit new members to the school’s sponsor club. This was a rather straightforward proposition: the exchange of financial and moral support for access to uniquely immediate spiritual power.

These promises fused to broader claims about the roles of “exceptional children” as intercessors. Mid-century Catholic advocates regularly suggested that this population could compensate for the sins of others. St. Coletta’s long-serving second superintendent Sr. Mary Theodore summarized this notion, writing, “We trust that the liveliness of the faith of these retarded children will make reparation to God for the sins of defiance committed by some of the intelligentsia.” This notion of “reparation,” the Catholic understanding that one might work to expiate the sins of another, was often invoked and helped advocates to make the case for putatively non-“exceptional” individuals’ dependence upon this population
in light of eternity. As saints-on-earth, they were doing nothing less than helping to save the world.27

The school’s shrine was not the only means for reminding people of this idea, but it was a preferred one. St. Coletta’s leaders produced and circulated postcards of the grotto as a way of suturing the imagination of various publics to the school and its residents. Artifacts of this kind were everywhere in twentieth-century Catholic devotional culture, but what was perhaps distinctive about this object was its potential to communicate the Blessed Virgin, St. Bernadette, as well as saints not yet in heaven. Like many cognate postcards, the image pictures no human figures, and their absence helps to facilitate a sense of immediacy for the beholder, as if they were at the shrine. However, for those who knew anything about what the card announced as “The St. Coletta Institute,” this object offered a chance of contact with not just a shrine but also with the population whom the school’s chaplain christened as spiritual “monuments of greatness.”28

What might that contact have been like? What sorts of images and ideas of persons with cognitive disabilities did recipients mobilize in their engagements with this object as they stood by their postbox, as these cards sat propped on desks or windowsills? Did they feel the prayers of the “exceptional” through the linen paper as they offered their own to the Virgin? Did they hope that some of the spiritual power of St. Coletta’s students might ferry their own petitions to heaven with greater speed?

When situated within broader mid-century Catholic discourse about the “exceptional child,” affirmative answers to many of these questions seem likely. We might, for example, look to the St. Louis mother who reported to Rev. Gerard Breitenbeck, a prominent Catholic advocate for the “exceptional,” that her neighbors regularly called her home to request the prayers of her cognitively impaired children.29 It seems—and as Breitenbeck and others reported—many were ready to find more immediate connections to the divine via these forms of difference.30

The leaders at St. Coletta’s drew upon and advanced the notions that motivated this kind of request and offered artifacts like the Lourdes postcards as ampullae of sorts, objects that could transport bits of power and presence from the life of their school. Such objects and the ideas they affirmed recommended St. Coletta’s, its students, and others who shared
their identities as something like “clusters of radiance” within the wider landscapes of postwar devotional culture.\textsuperscript{31}

Cloistering, Containing

How can—and should—we read Catholics’ constructions of these “probable saints” on the other side of the disability rights movement and the subsequent arrival of disability studies as a field of critical inquiry?\textsuperscript{32}

For one, those historical developments help to make plain—perhaps glaring—how constructions of exceptional sainthood justified the social segregation of people with cognitive disabilities. Although the mid-century leaders of St. Coletta’s refused regnant logics that sought to permanently sever the “mentally deficient” from society, they nevertheless supported such persons’ removal from their communities and families of origin as part of a broader rehabilitative promise. By casting this population’s
social remove in terms of its members’ spiritual identities, their kinship with a figure like Bernadette and her hinterland holiness, the grammars of Catholic devotionalism likely siphoned attention from the wider forces and facts of social exclusion. This was made especially apparent in yet another popular sobriquet mid-century Catholics sometimes applied to this population, one that classified people with cognitive disabilities as “God’s cloistered children.” Resonating with notions of “reparation” and spiritual (inter)dependence, this label helped to obscure questions about the sources of this population’s isolation—and their lack of say in the matter. Such classifications surely provided little comfort to persons who felt exiled from the places they might have otherwise called home.

Disability studies has also supplied a host of resources for analyzing other dimensions of these assignments of holiness. From its earliest inception, the field has interrogated what political scientist Harlan Hahn referred to as the “asexual objectification” of persons with disabilities. As the literary scholar Robert McRuer notes, in many modern contexts, disabled persons have been constructed through a punitive binary that renders them either hypersexual—and therefore as a threat—or as “incapable of having sexual desires or a sexual identity.” He explains that the later construction most often surfaces through notions of “innocence.”

In the case of the “most probable saints of God,” such constructions were unapologetic and explicit. Responding to lingering eugenic stereotypes of sexual deviance and drawing upon enduring theological notions of chastity, part of the means by which mid-century Catholics conferred value to this population, as noted earlier, was by placing them beyond the sexual. That (dis)placement was reinforced by figures like Bernadette and the Blessed Virgin and underscored in virtually all the classifications we’ve encountered. “Cloistered children,” “exceptional children,” and “probable saints” all painted this population in terms of sexual naivete and purity.

Disability scholars’ critique of this kind of “asexualization” helps to draw attention to its contingency—to the fact that it required and encouraged the management of the bodies it tried to claim. This is exemplified in what Sr. Mary Theodore described as St. Coletta’s “hands-off policy with self and others” in The Challenge of the Retarded Child. She touted a system of punishment and reward that prevented what she referred to as “unpleasant and immoral situations” among the institution’s residents.
Here we have a reticent admission of desires and acts that contradicted widespread fantasies of the cognitively disabled’s “innocence.” Pleasures taken in private. Wanted and unwanted advances. Sex in the unobserved spaces of institutional life. Such an admission underscored the fact that this population’s holiness regularly required coercion and restraint—requirements that registered bodily in relationships prohibited, intimacies interrupted, and other unnamed penalties. All of which is to say, disability studies helps to draw our attention to scenes like these where the making of “ready-made saints” was a matter of compulsion—and could hurt.  

Both lines of assessment—notice complicity in the ideologies of institutionalization and “asexual objectification”—seem to affirm more general critiques of religious discourses surrounding bodily difference. Many scholars have challenged how (usually Christian) theological renderings of human impairments tend to turn disabled bodies into “props and instruments” for others. Such acts of what the historian of U.S. Catholicism Robert Orsi calls “religious and political transubstantiation” tend to reduce the populations they mark as “special” to symbols and “vehicles for the anxieties, hopes, and values of others” in ways that are often disconnected from helping those they name to “live better lives.”

Indeed, in the case of so-called exceptional children, assignments of “specialness” incentivized the denial and repression of vast arenas of experience. These included sexual desires and acts, but also many other affective states and longings. The kinds of descriptions encountered above of this population as free from “worry” and “mundane attachments” helped to obscure ambitions and disappointments that might complicate romanticized notions of easy faith and steady contentment. Such rhetorical moves underscore what many have identified as religious discourse’s extractive and repressive tendencies when it comes to extraordinary bodies.

In addition to occluding vast arenas of experience, another problem with religious constructions of human impairments, according to many scholars, is how they “obfuscate the social construction of disability.” In their article “Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance,” pioneering disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder condemn, with the help of Friedrich Nietzsche, how notions of salvation, redemption, and the supernatural deflect attention away from “the demands of earthly existence—including the ability to accommodate lives that, at least
outwardly, appear lacking in social utility.” They decry how attempts to register human impairments in otherworldly terms distract from what we might gloss as the ideological and material conditions of disablement—debarring political questions and critique in the here and now. This section’s discussion of how representations of “exceptional children” sacralized institutional life could easily serve as a case in point for Snyder and Mitchell’s thesis.  

Conclusion

And yet, many of the sources discussed in this chapter complicate the durable notion that theological renderings of disability necessarily inhibit political inquiry and activity. The broader context of the mid-century “remaking” of cognitive disability” brings into relief how claims about the “exceptional child’s” saintliness surfaced as answers to urgent political and cultural questions. These included: What values and assumptions had led to the widespread social abuse and neglect of this population? What sorts of beliefs and practices would support recognition of its members’ personhood? How might they be sustained?

In taking up these queries, mid-century Catholic advocates for the “exceptional” developed pointed critiques of twentieth-century U.S. society and its roles in the disablement of people labeled “mentally handicapped.” For instance, Sr. Mary Theodore pronounced, “The greatest handicap of any retarded individual is the dearth of tolerance, sympathy, and understanding on the part of the public.” She was joined by many others in decrying what one postwar father of a child with a cognitive disability named the “cold and impersonal logic” that governed medical and economic appraisals of human difference in the modern world, leading to whole groups of people being (dis)carded as social “waste.” Far from aspiring to completely escape the temporal through acts of symbolic arrogation, many Catholics were committed to diagnosing and treating the ills of what Rev. Breitenbeck referred to as a “thoughtless society.” St. Coletta’s and its sibling schools were experiments. In ways reminiscent of some nineteenth-century asylums, they were attempts to rewrite the institution for people with cognitive disabilities not as a site of abandonment but as a center in the spiritual and social life of a broader community. St. Coletta’s leaders hoped that their efforts to educate this
population “in an atmosphere of confidence and joy” (as one postwar brochure put it) would corroborate broader attempts to integrate the “mentally handicapped” into U.S. American life in new ways. Through the care they provided, these leaders and advocates aspired to address the “dearth” that Sr. Mary Theodore named, carving out novel space and possibilities for the “exceptional.”

Making such persons “saints” in order to do so was dangerous. It enabled the kinds of alienation and exploitation to which scholars of disability have drawn our attention—and which some of the actors in this chapter would come to repudiate themselves. But it also proved a central part of efforts to think of “exceptional” bodyminds as “something other than a problem,” to borrow historian of religion Mary Dunn’s recent formulation. These claims helped Catholics to theorize the social value of vulnerability and to argue for the ways in which putatively “un-exceptional” persons’ lives might be implicated in (and responsible to) those of persons at society’s margins.

St. Coletta’s Lourdes grotto mediated this saint-making. As I have sought to demonstrate, it furnished established scripts for holiness, helping to set the terms for Catholic audiences’ investment in persons with cognitive disabilities. Not unlike the photograph discussed above, it provided means to “capture” this population in tightly defined roles. However, like any shrine, it fixed but also opened space for making relationships anew. By helping to mark a place like St. Coletta’s and its students as crucial nodes in the networks of postwar devotional life, this shrine invited its audiences to reimagine the possible connections between institution and community, between parent and child, and between the “exceptional” and supposedly “unexceptional.” In doing so, it served as both an index of and a means to realize other worlds—in heaven and on earth.

Notes


This chapter features several classifications for cognitive impairment (e.g., “mental retardation,” “mental handicaps,” “exceptional,” “mental deficiency”), many of which have since been rejected as offensive and denigrating thanks to the work of many self-advocates and their allies in the last quarter century. I make clear throughout that this older vocabulary belongs to my subjects. When speaking in my voice, I use the terms “persons with cognitive disabilities” or “persons with cognitive impairments” interchangeably. My choice to preserve some mid-century language for describing these forms of difference is motivated by a desire to underscore the contingency of all these descriptors and, indeed, of disability itself. It is worth noting that the category perhaps most offensive today (the “R-word”) was promoted in this period as a solution to earlier era’s prejudices, as it was meant to mark a confidence in the capacity of persons thus labeled to learn and develop, albeit at a different pace.

Readers will also notice the subjects in this chapter’s frequent use of the phrase “exceptional children,” which was employed by both Catholics and non-Catholics. The notion that people with cognitive disabilities of any age were developmentally “children” was essential to public plays for their social acceptance in this period and had particular resonance within the context of Catholic devotionalism. I discuss the costs of this rhetorical infantilization later in the essay. For more on classifications of cognitive impairment and the activism that has driven the most recent shifts in vocabulary, see Marty Ford, Annie Acosta, and T. J. Sutcliffe, “Beyond Terminology: The Policy Impact of a Grassroots Movement,” Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 51, no. 2 (2013): 108–112.

3. For more on the Foundation and the Kennedy family’s role in shaping the politics of cognitive disability in the U.S., see Edward Shorter, The Kennedy Family and the Story of Mental Retardation (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). An important point of connection here, but not elaborated on in this chapter, is that St. Coletta’s garnered public attention at several points throughout the second half of the twentieth century as audiences learned (and relearned) that Rosemary Kennedy lived on the school’s campus from 1949 to 2005 in a cabin built by her parents. U.S. audiences were first informed that Rosemary had a cognitive impairment after John F. Kennedy’s election as president in a 1962 article penned by their sibling Eunice Shriver. It was much later that both her siblings and the public learned that her institutionalization
at St. Coletta’s (which was not mentioned in Shriver’s article) was precipitated by her father’s choice to have her lobotomized in 1941, which led to increased interest in her life. See Eunice Shriver, “Hope for Retarded Children,” The Saturday Evening Post, Sept. 22, 1962, 71–75; Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff, The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women (Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 2015); Kate Clifford Larson, Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2015).

4. I focus roughly on the two decades that followed the Second World War. The life of St. Coletta’s Lourdes shrine precedes this period, having been built in 1912, less than a decade after the Sisters of St. Francis began caring for persons they referred to at that time as “backward children.” However, the shrine does not surface much in the institution’s archives until later, and it is my suspicion that the broader cultural changes tracked in this chapter increased its importance to those in and around St. Coletta’s.


On “forgotten children,” see Stanley High, “Forgotten Children No Longer,” Reader’s Digest, September 1960, 121–123; and The Forgotten Ones: Third Annual Workshop on Special Education of the Exceptional Child (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955). It is important to note that the break with the past that these actors announced was aspirational and decidedly limited. As scholars have shown, there was plenty of ideological and personal continuity in discourse about disability and reproduction between the eugenic and postwar eras. See Alexandra Minna Stern, Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America (Berkeley: University of California, 2005).

boundaries of the categories “mental deficiency” and “mental retardation” were flexible. Most interpreters agreed that such diagnoses named a “permanent condition” that was appraised in terms of a combination of “social inadequacy” and a lack of intellectual ability as appraised via IQ tests and other assessment techniques. These conditions were contrasted with “mental illness,” which was regarded as “disturbance” of “mental power” rather than an “inability to develop.” These classifications still accommodated a wide range of differences, from “brain damage” to “mongolism” (a racist categorization that would soon be reclassified as Down Syndrome), and cerebral palsy. See Sr. Mary Theodore, *Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 22–61. As many scholars have noted, the capaciousness of these terms enabled their arbitrary application when it came to things like institutionalization; they were sometimes a catchall for persons others simply wanted “put away.” See, for example, Dave Bakke, *God Knows His Name: The True Story of John Doe No. 24* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000). For more on the (ongoing) history of such categories’ racist application in the field of education, see *DisCrit—Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. David Connor, Beth Ferri, and Subini Annamma (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).


9. For a full list of Catholic institutions founded in this period, see *Directory of Catholic Special Facilities and Programs in the United States for Handicapped

10. Ruth Harris, Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 23–24, 51, 68. An important scriptural reference for this framework is 1 Corinthians 1:27–29 in which the apostle Paul suggests that “The foolish things of the world hath God chosen that He may confound the wise.” This passage serves as the epigraph to the British priest Alban Goodier’s popular Saints for Sinners (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945), which features another prominent icon of the hermeneutic I am describing, the seventeenth-century priest St. Joseph of Cupertino, whom Goodier names “the dunce.”

11. Harris notes that there was a crucial kind of lamination that took place in representations of Bernadette’s “marginality.” While her supposed impairments preserved her from the less than holy, so too, it was assumed, did the social and geographic isolation of a place like Lourdes, her family’s place on the lower rungs of its political and economic hierarchies, and her position within her family as a young girl. That is to say, the representation of Bernadette’s disability reinforced and rhymed with a host of social/symbolic positions that were likewise imagined as disabling, including childhood itself. Harris, Lourdes, 150. For more on modern Catholic constructions of childhood and Marianism—the mutual constitution of the “age of Mary” and the “age of children”—see Robert Orsi, “Material Children: Making God’s Presence Real for Catholic Boys and Girls and for the Adults in Relation to Them,” in Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 73–109.


13. Father Ralph S.V.D., Bernadette of Lourdes (Techny, Ill.: The Mission Press, 1948), 3 and 9. For other instances of similar language, see Novena Prayers in Honor of Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Bernadette (New York: Paulist Press, 1938); directed by Henry King, The Song of Bernadette (1943; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2010), DVD. As was the case in the nineteenth century, there was productive ambiguity in representations of Bernadette’s difference in the twentieth-century U.S. In some instances, an author or interpreter might emphasize her social displacement as a “lowly peasant” or her “childishness” instead of a particular impairment. However, crucial to
constructions of her subjectivity—to her holiness—in all instances was some notion of cognitive limitation.


15. This essay was reprinted in some St. Coletta’s promotional materials. Prospectus, “St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children,” ca. 1950, Box 9700, Folder 7, Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.


21. The quoted language can be found in “Philosophic Aspect Is Background of Thesis,” *St. Coletta’s Homelights*, April 1952, 4. There was truth to these claims to better care, at least in part, because Catholic institutions were not subject to the political and economic constraints that state institutions faced. They could limit the amount and kinds of students they admitted and, at least in the middle of the twentieth century, they did not need to worry about labor as other institutions did, thanks to the work of the religious who staffed them. It was also the case that St. Coletta’s leaders and their allies were self-consciously committed to correcting what they saw to be the errors of the past and to finding new ways to educate and cultivate meaningful lives for persons with cognitive disabilities.


23. This relief is still visible on St. Coletta’s abandoned campus in Jefferson.
24. Doing so might have also helped parents to believe that their children’s differences were signs of their election by God to play privileged roles in the plan of salvation. Postwar parents were regularly encouraged by their peers and Catholic authorities to identify with the Blessed Mother as “chosen” parents. See Esther Vanamee Griffin, “The Angel,” Catholic World (April 1951), 35; Breitenbeck, For Parents of Retarded Children, 7.


27. Sr. Mary Theodore, Challenge of the Retarded Child, 149. See also, Breitenbeck, For Parents of Retarded Children, 18.

28. Rev. James Feider, “Catholic Child Psychology: A Niche in Catholic Philosophy for the Handicapped Child,” in Prospectus, “St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children,” ca. 1950, Box 9700, Folder 7, Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. St. Coletta’s leaders produced a wide variety of postcards that featured images of the school’s grounds and buildings that served similar purposes. My focus here, however, is on what was uniquely condensed in the image of the institution’s grotto.

29. Gerard Breitenbeck, The Role and Value of the Retarded Child (Liguori, MO: Liguorian Pamphlets, 1965), 16. Breitenbeck was a Redemptorist priest who positioned himself as an expert adviser and advocate for persons with cognitive disabilities and their families in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to the two pamphlets cited here, he produced several other texts via his congregation’s publishing arm, including, May the Retarded Receive Communion? (Liguori, MO: Liguorian Pamphlets, 1964).


32. While Audra Jennings makes the case that elements of the disability rights movement were nurtured in the postwar era, it is generally agreed upon that the movement—as an articulation of identity and demand for self-determination—was born in the 1970s. See Jennings, “Introduction,” Out of the
Horrors of War. See also Joseph Shapiro, No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement (New York: Crown, 1994).

33. See, for example, “Holy Innocents: You Can Assist These Handicapped Children,” Monitor (San Francisco), August 19, 1960, 17.


37. This is not to say that sainthood could not also feel quite good. Certainly, many persons with cognitive disabilities found various kinds of pleasure in playing the holy part and the rewards it conferred, earthly or otherwise. I take for granted that persons with cognitive disabilities were integral to the “making up” of what it meant to be “the most probable saints of God” in places like St. Coletta’s. That said, my focus here, toward the conclusion of the essay, is on the sharper edges of these scripts. I have borrowed the phrase “making up” from Ian Hacking, “Making Up People,” in Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellberry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 161–71.


39. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth, 77. It is important to note that Orsi comes to these insights via sources that overlap significantly with my own:
twentieth-century Catholics’ constructions of physical disability and sickness as well as notions of childhood.

40. Of course, these dynamics are not exclusive to disability. As Françoise Meltzer and Jaś Elsner write of saints and their “excesses,” “To sanctify excess is a form of domestication; in the institutionalization of a saint there frequently lies the attempt to neutralize, to appropriate or otherwise bring under rule.” Françoise Meltzer and Jaś Elsner, “Introduction: Holy by Special Application,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 375–379.


45. Breitenbeck, *For Parents of Retarded Children*, 8. Sometimes these critiques of “cold logic” were pointed at specific practices like sterilization. More often they named what were understood to be pervasive attitudes that stood in the way of this population’s “acceptance” and filial belonging. For more on the earlier history of U.S. Catholic engagements with eugenics, see Sharon Leon, *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For an example of a postwar response to practices of sterilization, see Rosemary French, “Letter: Human Sterilization Proposal,” *America*, May 2, 1953.


47. Sr. Mary Theodore continued to work in disability services throughout the twentieth century. In her later work, she criticized assignments of perennial “childhood,” emphasized the importance of recognizing persons with cognitive disabilities’ sexuality, and navigated the transition away from institutional services to a more “community-based” model. See Sr. Mary Theodore Hegeman, *Developmental Disability: A Family Challenge* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

49. In this respect, they anticipated subsequent communal experiments surrounding cognitive impairment, most famously the network now known as L’Arche International, which was founded at the tail end of the period considered here. On L’Arche, see Jason Reimer Greig, Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L’Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).