

Group of autistic individuals receive communion in Rosebank church

By **JULIA I. MARTIN**,
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The sunlight, filtering softly through the stained glass windows, paled in comparison with the beaming expressions of first communicants and their families.

"Words aren't adequate. We're so elated," said Gretta D'Agostino. Her son, Peter, 23, was in the group of autistic individuals who received their first communion in St. Joseph's R.C. Church Sunday. She described the occasion as "very emotional."

The 19 males and one female are in programs of Eden II at Bayley Seton Hospital or On Your Mark, West Brighton. They range in age from 6 through 35.

Monsignor John T. Servodidio, pastor of the Rosebank church, is a member of the board of directors of Eden II. "He brought up the idea first," said Jane Maguire of Eden II, "and I volunteered."

She was assisted by Kim Donnelly of On Your Mark.

Autism, said Miss Maguire, is a neurological disorder that affects four out of every 10,000 children. Three of every four children diagnosed are male. Children are generally diagnosed during preschool years. Autistic children frequently exhibit lack of speech or speech difficulties, repetitive movements such as rocking, obsession with routines and difficulty relating to other people.

To prepare for the big day, Miss Maguire said, "the monsignor met with the 20, escorted them around the church, and showed them a video. He told them, 'God loves you, and you're going to receive Jesus in holy communion.'"

"Then they practiced the procession, and receiving the host. At the group homes and in the school, we practiced saying 'Amen.'"

The candidates were escorted by staff who volunteered from Eden II or On Your Mark. Sharon Wojciechowski, whose son, Jackie, 9, was among the first communicants, said, "Their love and caring helped make it happen."

The autistic population is "usually overlooked on social and spiritual milestones, and it's inspiring for us that our children can and should be welcome," said Mrs. Wojciechowski.

"It's great," said Joseph Casucci, whose son, Larry, 26, received his first communion. Casucci, who 17 years ago helped found Eden II, said he'd been hoping ever since then that his son would have that chance.

Part of the reason the group communion took so long to happen, said the monsignor, "is some of these families have been rejected over the years in their attempts to receive basic services for their children. So with that conditioning, they were reluctant to approach the church."

"Sometimes, a priest may have told a family the autistic child is sinless and doesn't need to receive communion, or a priest may have given the communion privately."

The reason to do it in a group setting, the monsignor added, "is to assure the children and the family that they are part of the church, not apart from the rest of the church."

The monsignor told those attending the mass that he and his parishioners felt very happy about the occasion. "We're all one family — all children of God."

James McCue said his son, Matthew, 13, was as proud as he could be the whole day. "Before he went to church, he was showing the neighbors how dressed up he was, and when he took the host, he was smiling."

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