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Message of the Holy Father for the International Day of persons with disabilities

The following is the Message the Holy Father has sent on the occasion of the International Day of persons with disabilities, taking place today, Tuesday 3 December. This year's theme is: "Building Back Better: toward a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world"

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

This year's celebration of the *International Day of Persons with Disabilities* is an occasion to express my closeness to those experiencing situations of particular difficulty during the crisis caused by the pandemic. All of us are in the same boat in the midst of a turbulent sea that can frighten us. Yet in this same boat, some of us are struggling more; among them are persons with serious disabilities.

The theme of this year's celebration is "*Building Back Better: Toward a Disability-inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable post-COVID-19 World.*" I find the expression "*building back better*" quite striking. It makes me think of the Gospel parable of the house built on rock or sand (cf. *Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:46-49*). So I take this special occasion to share some reflections based on that parable.

1. The threat of the throwaway culture

In the first place, the "rain", the "rivers" and the "winds" that threaten the house can be identified with the throwaway culture widespread in our time (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53). For that culture, "some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence. Ultimately, persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 18).

That culture affects especially the most vulnerable, among whom are the persons with disabilities. In the last fifty years, important steps forward have been taken on both the civil and ecclesial levels. Awareness of the dignity of each person has grown, and this has resulted in courageous decisions to promote the inclusion of those experiencing physical and psychological limitations. Yet, on the cultural level, much still stands in the way of this trend. We see it in attitudes of rejection, due also to a narcissistic and utilitarian mentality, that give rise to marginalization that ignores the inevitable fact that *frailty is part of everyone's life*. Indeed, some with even severe disabilities, despite great challenges, have found the way to a beautiful and meaningful life, whereas many "able-bodied" people feel dissatisfied or even desperate. "Vulnerability is intrinsic to the essential nature of humanity" (*Address to the Conference "Catechesis and People with Disabilities"*, 21 October 2017).

Consequently, it is important, on this Day, to promote a *culture of life* that constantly affirms the dignity of every person and works especially to defend men and women with disabilities, of all ages and social conditions.

2. The "rock" of inclusion

The present pandemic has further highlighted the disparities and inequalities widespread in our time, particularly to the detriment of the most vulnerable. "The virus, while it does not distinguish between people, has found, in its devastating path, great inequalities and discrimination. And it has only made them worse" (*Catechesis at the General Audience* of 19 August 2020).

For this reason, *inclusion* should be the first "rock" on which to build our house. Although this term is at times overused, the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan (*Lk 10:25-37*) continues to be timely. Along the road of life, we often come across wounded people, and these can include persons with disabilities and particular needs. "The decision to include or exclude those lying wounded along the roadside can serve as a criterion for judging every economic, political, social and religious project. Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 69).

Inclusion should be the "rock" on which to build programmes and initiatives of civil institutions meant to ensure that no one, especially those in greatest difficulty, is left behind. The strength of a chain depends upon the attention paid to its weakest links.

As for ecclesial institutions, I reiterate the need to make available *suitable and accessible means* for handing on the faith. I also hope that these can be made available to those who need them, cost-free to the extent possible, also through the new technologies that have proven so important for everyone in the midst of this pandemic. I also encourage efforts to provide all priests, seminarians, religious, catechists and pastoral workers with *regular training* concerning disabilities and the use of inclusive pastoral tools. Parish communities should be concerned to encourage among the faithful a welcoming attitude towards people with disabilities. Creating a fully accessible parish requires not only the removal of architectural barriers, but above all, helping parishioners to develop attitudes and acts of solidarity and service towards persons with disabilities and their families. Our aim should be to speak no longer about "them", but rather about "us".

3. The "rock" of active participation

To help our society to "*build back better*", inclusion of the vulnerable must also entail efforts to promote their *active participation*.

Before all else, I strongly reaffirm the right of persons with disabilities to *receive the sacraments*, like all other members of the Church. All liturgical celebrations in the parish should be accessible to them, so that, together with their brothers and sisters, each of them can deepen, celebrate, and live their faith. Special attention should be paid to people with disabilities who have not yet received the sacraments of Christian initiation: they should be welcomed and included in programmes of catechesis in preparation for these sacraments. No one should be excluded from the grace of these sacraments.

“In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). People with disabilities, both in society and in the Church, also wish to become *active subjects* of our pastoral ministry, and not simply its recipients. “Many persons with disabilities feel that they exist without belonging and without participating. Much still prevents them from being fully enfranchised. Our concern should be not only to care for them, but also to ensure their ‘active participation’ in the civil and ecclesial community. That is a demanding and even tiring process, yet one that will gradually contribute to the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 98). Indeed, the active participation of people with disabilities in the work of catechesis can greatly enrich the life of the whole parish. Precisely because they have been grafted onto Christ in baptism, they share with him, in their own particular way, the priestly, prophetic, and royal mission of evangelizing *through, with* and *in* the Church.

The presence of persons with disabilities among catechists, according to their own gifts and talents, is thus a resource for the community. Efforts should be made to provide them with appropriate training, so that they can acquire greater knowledge also in the areas of theology and catechesis. I trust that, in parish communities, more and more people with disabilities can become catechists, in order to pass on the faith effectively, also by their own witness (cf. *Address at the Conference “Catechesis and People with Disabilities”*, 21 October 2017).

“Even worse than this crisis would be the tragedy of squandering it” (*Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost*, 31 May 2020). For this reason, I encourage all those who daily and often silently devote themselves to helping others in situations of fragility and disability. May our common desire to “*build back better*” give rise to new forms of cooperation between both civil and ecclesial groups and thus build a solid “house” ready to withstand every storm and capable of welcoming people with disabilities, because built on the rock of *inclusion* and *active participation*.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 3 December 2020

FRANCIS
