



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS FOR INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

On the occasion of *International Day of Persons with Disabilities*, we renew our gaze of faith, which sees in every brother and sister the presence of Christ himself, who considers each gesture of love for one of the least of his brothers to be made for himself (cf. *Gospel of Matthew* 25:40). On this occasion, I would like to recall that the promotion of participation rights today plays a central role in fighting against discrimination and fostering the culture of encounter and quality of life.

Great progress has been made towards people with disabilities in the medical and welfare fields, but still today we can see the presence of the culture of waste and many of them feel that they exist without belonging and without participating. All this demands not only the protection of the rights of people with disabilities and their families, but it also urges us to make the world more human by removing everything that prevents them from full citizenship, the obstacles of prejudice, and by promoting accessibility to places and a quality of life that take into account all the dimensions of the human.

We need to care for and accompany people with disabilities in every condition of life, also through the use of current technologies but without regarding them as absolute; taking on situations of marginalization with strength and tenderness; making way with them and “anointing them” with dignity for an active participation in the civil and ecclesial community. It is a demanding and even tiring journey, which will increasingly contribute to the formation of consciences capable of recognizing each of us as a unique and unrepeatable person.

And let us not forget the many “hidden exiles” who live in our homes, our families and our societies (cf. *Angelus*, 29 December 2013; *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 12 January 2015). I am thinking of people of all ages, especially the elderly, who, also due to their disability, are sometimes considered a burden, a “cumbersome presence”, and risk being discarded, denied concrete job prospects to participate in the creation of their future.

We are called to recognize in every person with disabilities, even complex and serious disabilities, a unique contribution to the common good through their original life stories. Recognizing the dignity of each person, knowing that it does not depend on the functionality of the five senses (cf. *Discussion with the participants in the Convention of the CEI on disability*, 11 June 2016). The Gospel teaches us this conversion. We need to develop antibodies against a culture that considers some lives first-class and others second-class: this is a social sin! — to have the courage to give a voice to those who are discriminated against due to their disability, because unfortunately in some countries, still today, people struggle to recognize them as persons of equal dignity, as brothers and sisters in humanity.

Indeed, making good laws and breaking down physical barriers is important, but it is not enough, if the mentality does not change as well, if we do not overcome a widespread culture that continues to produce inequalities, preventing people with disabilities from actively participating in ordinary life.

In recent years inclusive processes have been put in place and developed, but this is still not enough, because, in addition to physical barriers, prejudice also gives rise to limitations on access to education for all, employment and participation. In order to build themselves, people with disabilities not only need to exist but they also need to belong to a community.

I encourage all those who work with people with disabilities to continue this important service and commitment, which determines the degree of civilization of a nation. And I pray that each person may feel God's paternal gaze which affirms their full dignity and the unconditional value of their life.

From the Vatican, 3 December, 2019

FRANCIS