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Audience with the participants in the Conference organised by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation

At 11.30 today, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Conference *Catechesis and Persons with Disabilities: A Necessary Engagement in the Daily Pastoral Life of the Church*, organised by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, taking place at the Pontifical Urbanian University, Rome, from 20 to 22 October 2017.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I rejoice at meeting you, especially because in these days you have considered a theme of great importance for the life of the Church in her work of evangelisation and Christian formation: *Catechesis and Persons with Disabilities*. I thank H.E. Msgr. Fisichella for his introduction, the dicastery over which he presides for its service, and all of you for your work in this field.

We know the great development that throughout recent decades has taken place in relation to disability. The growth in awareness of the dignity of every person, especially the weakest, has led to courageous positions being taken for the inclusion of those who live with various forms of handicap, so that no-one need feel like an outsider in their own home. However, at cultural level there persist expressions that harm the dignity of these people through the prevalence of a false concept of life. A vision that is often narcissistic and utilitarian unfortunately leads many to consider as marginal people with disabilities, without recognising in them the multiform human and spiritual wealth. An *attitude of denying this condition*, as if it prevented happiness and the realisation of the self, is still too strong in the common mentality. This is shown by the eugenic tendency to suppress unborn children when they are shown to have some form of imperfection. In reality, we all know many

people who, with their fragility, even in serious cases, have found the path of a good life rich in meaning, if with some hardship. Just as, on the other hand, we know people who are apparently perfect and desperate! Besides, it is a dangerous deceit to think we are invulnerable. Just as a girl I met on my recent trip to Colombia said to me, *vulnerability is part of the essence of man*.

The answer is love: not the false kind, overly sentimental and pietistic, but the true kind, concrete and respectful. To the extent in which we are welcomed and loved, included in the community and accompanied to look to the future with trust, the true path of life is developed and we experience lasting happiness. This, we know, is valid to all, but the most fragile are the proof. Faith is a great life companion when it permits us to touch with our hand the presence of a Father who never leaves His creatures alone, in no condition of their life. The Church cannot be aphonic or tone-deaf in the defence and promotion of people with disability. Her closeness to families helps her overcome the solitude in which they often risk closing themselves up due to a lack of attention and support. This is even more valid for the responsibility she possesses in the generation and formation of Christian life. There can be no lack in communities of the words and, above all, the gestures to encounter and welcome people with disabilities. The Sunday liturgy in particular must be able to include, so that the encounter with the Risen Lord and with the same community can be a source of hope and courage in the not always easy path of life.

Catechesis, in a special way, is called to discover and experiment with coherent forms so that *every person*, with his or her gifts, limits and disabilities, even serious, may encounter Jesus on the way and abandon himself to Him with faith. No physical or psychic limit may ever be an obstacle to this encounter, because the face of Christ shines in the intimacy of every person. In addition, let us be careful, especially us, as ministers in Christ's grace, not to fall into the neo-Pelagian trap of not recognising the need for the strength of the grace that comes from the Sacraments of Christian initiation. Let us learn to overcome discomfort and fear that at times can be felt with regard to people with disabilities. Let us learn to seek and also to "invent", with intelligence, suitable tools so that no-one lacks the support of grace. Let us form – first of all by example! – catechists who are increasingly capable of accompanying these people so that they may grow in faith and make their genuine and original contribution to the life of the Church. Finally, I hope that in communities, people with disabilities may too be catechists, also by their witness, to transmit faith in a more effective way.

I thank you for your work in these days, and for your service in the Church. May Our Lady accompany you. I heartily bless you and I ask you, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
