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May Christian communities be "homes" where all suffering encounters "com-passion": the Pope at the Convention for the Disabled

Vatican City, 11 June 2016 – Today the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Convention for the Disabled, promoted by the Italian Episcopal Conference to mark the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the institution of the Sector for the Catechesis of Disabled Persons of the Italian National Catechistic Office. He set aside his prepared discourse – ample extracts of which are published below – and instead answered questions posed by those present.

In prepared text, he notes that commemoration "inspires renewed commitment to ensuring that the disabled are fully welcomed in parishes, in associations and in ecclesial movements", and invites those present to continue to work in this area, with "awareness of the educability in faith of the disabled person", and the "will to consider him or her as an active subject in his or her community".

"These brothers and sisters are not only able to live a genuine experience of encounter with Christ, but also to bear witness of this to others. Much has been done in the pastoral care of the disabled; it is necessary to continue to move ahead, for instance by better recognising their apostolic and missionary capacity, and above all the value of their 'presence' as people, as living members of the ecclesial Body. In weakness and frailty there are hidden treasures able to renew our Christian communities."

Noting that in the Church there is widespread attention to disability in its physical, mental and sensory forms, and a general attitude of welcome, the Holy Father nonetheless comments that "our communities still have difficulties in practising true inclusion and a full participation that finally becomes ordinary and normal. This requires not only specific techniques and programmes, but first of all acknowledgement and welcoming of faces, tenacious and patient certainty that each person is unique and unrepeatable, and each excluded face is an impoverishment of the community."

Francis highlights that in this mission the participation of families is indispensable, and urged Christian communities to be "homes" in which every form of suffering finds com-passion. In this regard, citing the apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the bishop of Rome stresses that "the attention shown to migrants and to persons with special needs alike is a sign of the Spirit. Both situations are paradigmatic: they serve as a test of our

commitment to show mercy in welcoming others and to help the vulnerable to be fully a part of our community."

The Pope observes that a decisive place for the inclusion of the disabled is occupied by the admission to the Sacraments. "If we recognise the peculiarity and the beauty of their experience of Christ and in the Church, we must as a consequence affirm clearly that they are called to the fullness of sacramental life, even in the presence of serious mental disorders. It is sad to see that in some cases there remain doubts, resistance and even refusal. Often refusal is justified on the grounds that 'in any case they do not understand', or 'they have no need'. In reality, this attitude demonstrates a failure to fully understand the meaning of the Sacraments themselves, and in practice denies to the disabled the exercise of their divine sonship and full participation in the ecclesial community", he continues, recalling that the Sacrament is a gift and liturgy is life. "Before being understood rationally, it must be lived in the specific nature of personal and ecclesial experience. In this sense, the Christian community is called to work to allow every baptised person to experience Christ in the Sacraments. The community must therefore be committed to ensuring that the disabled are able to experience that God is our Father and loves us, that He favours the poor and the smallest through the simple daily gestures of love they are to receive."

"It is important also to pay attention to the location and participation of the disabled in liturgical assemblies: to be in the assembly and to play a role in the liturgical action with song and meaningful gestures contributes to supporting each person's sense of belonging. It is about creating a mentality and a style that protects them from prejudice, exclusion and marginalisation, favouring an effective fraternity in respect for diversity appreciated as a value", concludes the Holy Father.
