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Message of the Holy Father on the occasion of International Day of Persons with Disabilities

The following is the Message sent by the Holy Father Francis on the occasion of International Day of Persons with Disabilities, held today, Saturday 3 December:

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

All of us, as the Apostle Paul would say, hold the treasure of life in earthen vessels (cf. *2 Cor* 4:7). The International Day of Persons with Disabilities invites us to recognize that our frailty in no way obscures "the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ", but instead reveals that "its extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (*2 Cor* 4:4,7). Everyone, apart from any merit or distinction, has received the Gospel in its entirety and, with this, the joyful task of proclaiming it. "All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 121). Sharing the Gospel, in fact, is not a duty entrusted only to some, but an absolute necessity for all those who have encountered Jesus and enjoyed his friendship.[1]

Trust in the Lord, the experience of his tender love and the comfort of his companionship, are not the privilege of a few, or the prerogative only of those who have received a lengthy and thorough formation. Rather, his mercy makes itself known in a particular way to those who, instead of trusting in themselves, feel called to abandon themselves to the Lord and to empathize with their brothers and sisters. This brings with it a wisdom that gradually increases our awareness of our limits and allows us to appreciate all the more God's loving decision to help us in our weakness. An awareness that frees us from sorrow and lament – even for good reason – and opens our hearts to praise. The joy that radiates from those who encounter Jesus and entrust their lives to him is no illusion or the fruit of naiveté; it is the power of his resurrection penetrating lives marked by fragility.

Truly, we can speak of a *magisterium of fragility* that, if heeded, would make our society more humane and fraternal, enabling all of us to understand that happiness is bread that is not eaten alone. How much would a

better awareness of our need for one another help us to have less hostile relationships with those around us! And how much would the realization that entire peoples cannot save themselves prompt us to seek solutions to the senseless conflicts we are experiencing!

On this Day, we want to be mindful of the sufferings of all those women and men with disabilities who live in the midst of war, or have been themselves disabled as a result of warfare. How many people – in Ukraine and in other theatres of war – remain imprisoned by ongoing conflicts, without the possibility of escape? They need to be given special attention and their access to humanitarian aid facilitated in every possible way.

This *magisterium of fragility* is a charism by which you – dear sisters and brothers with disabilities – can enrich the Church. Your presence "may help transform the actual situations in which we live, making them more human and more welcoming. Without vulnerability, without limits, without obstacles to overcome, there would be no true humanity".[2] For this reason, I am pleased that the synodal journey is proving a favourable occasion to listen at last to your voices, and that an echo of your participation can be found in the preparatory document for the continental stage of the Synod. There we read that: "Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities, and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation: in spite of its own teachings, the Church is in danger of imitating the way society casts them aside. The forms of discrimination listed – the lack of listening, the violation of the right to choose where and with whom to live, the denial of the sacraments, the accusation of witchcraft, abuse – and others, describe the culture of rejection towards persons with disabilities. They do not arise by chance, but have in common the same root: the idea that the lives of persons with disabilities are worth less than others".[3]

The Synod, above all by its invitation to journey together and to listen to one another, can help us understand how in the Church – also with regard to the disabled – there can be no *us* and *them*, but a single *us*, with Jesus Christ at the centre, where each person brings his or her own gifts and limitations. This awareness, founded on the fact that we are all part of the same vulnerable humanity assumed and sanctified by Christ, eliminates arbitrary distinctions and opens the door to the participation of each baptized member in the life of the Church. What is more, in those places where the Synod has been truly inclusive, it has permitted us to dispel deep-rooted prejudices. Encounter and fraternity break down the walls of misunderstanding and overcome discrimination; this is why I trust that every Christian community will be open to the presence of our brothers and sisters with disabilities, and ensure that they are always welcomed and fully included.

We come to realize that we exist as an *us* and not a *them* whenever disability, whether temporary or due to natural aging, affects ourselves or someone for whom we care. Then we begin to look at reality with new eyes and we see the need to break down even those barriers that at first seemed insignificant. Nothing, however, can detract from our certainty that no disability – temporary, acquired or permanent – can change the fact that we are all children of the one Father and enjoy the same dignity. The Lord loves us all with the same tender, fatherly and unconditional love.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for the initiatives taking place on this International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and I accompany them with my prayers. I bless you all from my heart and ask you, please, to pray for me.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 3 December 2022

FRANCIS

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[1] Cf. *Message for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities*, 20 November 2021.

[2] *The Church is our Home*. Summary Document of the special Synod consultation of persons with disabilities, by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, No. 2, found on the Dicastery website.

[3] Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod on Synodality. 36.