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Audience with a delegation of Ministers participating in the G7 Meeting on Inclusion and Disability

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the G7 Meeting on Inclusion and Disability, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

*Distinguished Ministers and Delegates,
Ladies and Gentleman,*

Excuse me for being late, but there were many things happening this morning. I greet all of you with gratitude and appreciation for your efforts to promote the dignity and rights of people with disabilities. When I was once speaking about people with disabilities, someone said to me, “be careful because we all have a disability!” All of us. It is true. This meeting, on the occasion of the G7, is concrete evidence of the desire to build a more just and inclusive world, in which each person, with his or her own abilities, can live to the full and contribute to the growth of society. Instead of speaking about disabilities, let us speak about different abilities because everyone has abilities. For example, I remember a group from a restaurant that visited here, which included both the cooks and waiters, and all of them were young men and women with disabilities. They all worked very well. I thank the Italian Minister for Disabilities, the Honourable Alessandra Locatelli, who is present today, for promoting this important initiative. Thank you.

Yesterday you signed the “Charter of Solfagnano”, the fruit of your work on such fundamental issues as inclusion, accessibility, independent living and the empowerment of persons. These themes are also present in the Church’s vision of human dignity. Indeed, every person is an integral part of the universal human family, and no one should fall victim to a throwaway culture, absolutely no one. This type of culture generates prejudice and damages society.

First, the inclusion of persons with disabilities must be recognized as a priority by all countries. I do not like the word “disability”, I prefer “differently abled”. Sadly, even today in some countries people find it hard to

acknowledge the equal dignity of such persons (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 98). Creating an inclusive world entails not only adapting structures but also changing minds, in order that people with disabilities may be considered full participants in social life. There can be no authentic human development without the involvement of the most vulnerable members of society. Universal accessibility is thus a great goal to be pursued, so that every physical, social, cultural and religious barrier may be eliminated and every individual can be enabled to develop his or her talents and contribute to the common good at every stage of life, from childhood to old age. It pains me when people live in a culture that discards old people. Old people offer wisdom but they are discarded as if they were a pair of old shoes.

Providing adequate facilities and services for people with disabilities is not only a matter of social assistance – it is not a policy of welfare – but it is about justice and respect for their dignity. All countries have the responsibility of ensuring the necessary conditions for the integral development of each individual within inclusive communities (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 107).

It is important, then, to work together in making it possible for persons with disabilities to choose their own path in life, free of the fetters of prejudice. The human person – let us remember – must never be a means but always an end! This means enhancing each person's abilities and providing opportunities for dignified employment. Excluding people from the possibility of work is a grave form of discrimination (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 162). Work is the anointing of dignity. If you exclude the possibility, you take that away from them. The same thing can be said with regard to participation in cultural events and sporting activities: excluding people with disabilities is an affront to human dignity.

The new technologies can also prove to be a powerful means for increasing inclusion and participation, provided they are made accessible to everyone. These technologies need to be directed towards the common good and placed at the service of a culture of encounter and solidarity. Technology ought to be used wisely, in order to avoid creating further inequalities and to help overcoming those that already exist.

Finally, in speaking of inclusion, we must take into account the urgent needs of the earth, our common home. We cannot be indifferent to the humanitarian emergencies linked to climate crises and conflicts, which have the greatest impact on those who are most vulnerable, including persons with disabilities (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 25). It is our duty to ensure that those with disabilities are not left behind in such situations, and that they are properly cared for and protected. What is needed is a system of prevention and emergency response that takes into account their specific needs and guarantees that no one is excluded from protection and assistance.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I view your work as a sign of hope for a world that all too often disregards people with disabilities or unfortunately rejects them away before they are born, “returning them to the sender” after seeing a scan. I urge you to persevere in your efforts, inspired by faith and the conviction that each person is a precious gift to society. Saint Francis of Assisi, who bore witness to a boundless love for the most vulnerable, reminds us that true wealth is found in our encounter with others – this culture of encounter needs to be developed – especially with those who tend to be “discarded” by an ersatz culture of wellbeing. Among those who are victims of being discarded are grandparents. Grandparents and elderly are left in nursing homes. This is a very bad thing. It reminds me of a good story. There was a grandfather who lived with his family, but as he grew older, he would make a mess while eating. One day the father made a separate table in the kitchen and told his son, “Grandpa will eat in the kitchen, so that we can invite guests”. After some time passed, the father came home from work to find his five-year-old son playing with tables. He asked him, “What are you doing?”. The son replied “I’m making a small table”. “A small table? Why?”, asked the father. The son replied, “for you dad, for when you become old”. What we do with old people, our children will do with us. Let us not forget that. Together we can build a world in which the dignity of each person is fully recognized and respected.

May God bless you and always accompany you in this important undertaking. Thank you.
