THE CHURCH IS OUR HOME

Introduction

Last May, the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, in agreement with the General Secretariat of the Synod, invited about 30 persons with disabilities from the five continents to actively participate in a synodal journey by offering their contribution through an open dialogue with the Holy See. After an *online* meeting, which in fact symbolically initiated the process, each person was invited to send in his or her personal written text, based on some questions that had been proposed. The goal was, on the one hand, to make known some experiences capable of bringing out the needs, but also journeys that have already been undertaken in some parts of the world. On the other hand, it was intended to welcome what the Spirit intends to say to the Church. The result of all this is the text we are presenting.

This initiative comes in the wake of the reflection that the Dicastery initiated about two years ago regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities and their full participation in the life of the Church: for an institution called to care for the lay faithful, this is not simply a new area of pastoral action, rather a decisive affirmation that the baptismal vocation is truly for all, with no exclusions.

In this perspective, however, it is necessary to keep a distance from certain ideas that, more or less explicitly, have marked the ecclesial approach towards this issue. Traditionally speaking, in fact, two readings of the condition of disability that only seem to be contrasting have alternated and blended: the first reading is of those who saw it as the result of a fault; the second is that of those who thought that the disabled were somehow purified by the suffering they experienced and, because of this, were somehow closer to the Lord. Interpreting the condition of disability as a punishment or as a blessing corresponds to imagining that the people who live it are either irredeemable sinners or angelic beings: these are opposing viewpoints, but each have in common the denial of the individuality of those concerned. In other words, in both cases, whether they were already saved or had no chance of salvation, their behavior, their choices, their spiritual life had no relevance.

For this reason, while persons with disabilities continued to be only the "subject" of other people' s dedication, the pastoral focus was mainly on the families or welfare institutions that cared for them.

For that matter, the resistance - which persists – to administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation to those who live with a condition of disability reveals how the understanding of the matter continues to be closely linked to the idea of sin. If this limitation is the fruit and sign of one' s fault, the fact that it does not vanish with confession will continue to demonstrate the guilty nature

of the person experiencing it (or at most his or her parents). If, on the contrary, suffering is considered a sign of an experience that is pure and preserved from sin, what is the point of asking for forgiveness? In both cases subjectivity is removed and interactions with the world and with God become absolutely irrelevant.

Therefore, a true change of paradigm is necessary. This can be initiated starting from the Council's statement that «For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man» (GS 22). Although it was not conceived in relation to persons with disabilities, it opens up a vast field of reflection and highlights that the Lord has taken *everything* upon Himself, truly *everything* that belongs to concrete and historical humanity, in *all* its possible variations, those precisely of *every* man and *every* woman, including disability.

These are observations that deserve much greater consideration and that can only be mentioned here, but they serve to affirm that persons with disabilities share - on the same level as those who do not (yet) experience this condition in an obvious way - the same nature, the same dignity and - above all - they possess their own individuality.

From this point of view, the words of Lumen Gentium that state that all the faithful are part of the People of God are very clear, and that they «are by baptism made one body with Christ [...] and are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world... [...]. They are called there by God that [...] they may work for the sanctification of the world [...] and in this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity» (LG 31). They should also find their application in the pastoral care of persons with disabilities.

If the person has a unique and irreplaceable value as a beloved child of the Father, we cannot think that the Father forgets anyone or leaves them on the sidelines, nor can we imagine that He deprives them of the special gifts, which He bestows so that, by virtue of Baptism, each person can proclaim the Kingdom of God.

On the basis of these reflections, it is a matter of proposing a change of mentality, which in some parts of the world is already underway or at least has set the basis for being understood and welcomed, while in other parts it is like a mountain yet to be climbed. It will be necessary to overcome any welfare approach by initiating a new approach that respects the individuality and a leading role of persons with disabilities.

The first step in this direction is to listen to persons with disabilities, and the synodal journey turned out to be a true *kairòs* since it offered a concrete opportunity to focus on their words and

recognize how much they have to say to the Church. It is also a way to affirm - as the Pope did in his message addressed to persons with disabilities - that "The Gospel is for everyone[1]".

Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

[1] Message of the Holy Father Pope Francis on the Occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 20 November 2021.

Summary document of the special synod consultation of persons with disabilities

1. *We exist*

People with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in the world today. In November 2017, the World Health Organization released some information that we believe is essential for understanding our reality and making progress toward our total inclusion: worldwide, more than 1 billion people live with a physical, organic, sensory, cognitive (intellectual) or mental disability. We make up about 15 % of the world's population.

People with disabilities are more vulnerable to poverty: we live in conditions that are worse - not enough food, inadequate housing, lack of access to clean water - when compared to other people. The current health and social crisis due to the pandemic has revealed that people with disabilities have shouldered the greatest burden. In this regard, the Pope wrote: "All of us are in the same boat in the midst of a turbulent sea that can frighten us. Yet in this same boat, some of us are struggling more; among them are persons with serious disabilities[2]".

Therefore, we gratefully embrace this courageous invitation of hope to speak out and have our say in this synodal process, following the proposal of Pope Francis who asked to: "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[3]".

2. *The "magisterium of fragility."*

The active presence of people with disabilities can help the Church overcome the efficiency-based and marginalizing mentality of today's society. It is what Pope Francis recently called a true "magisterium of fragility[4]". Seeing the fragility of one's brother or sister leads to reflecting upon one' s own and on the fact that we all - some more, some less - need the help of others. Contact with fragility strengthens one's faith, because it is precisely in weakness that God shows His love and mercy. Our 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.

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[2] Message of the Holy Father Pope Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 3 December 2020.

[3] Fratelli Tutti, 98

[4] General Audience, 1 June 2022.

In particular, after the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately took its toll on those with disabilities, the Church has much to learn from the mutual help that communities of people with disabilities have offered to one another.

Including those among us who have cognitive disabilities deserves greater attention. This participation in the life of the Church community can prove to be particularly valuable: in particular we want to recall that cognitive difficulties do not make one incapable of understanding the mystery of faith and being close to the Church; on the contrary, living the faith "heart to heart" with Jesus, in an intimate relationship that allows us to have an encounter with our friend Jesus[5], constitutes a concrete and strong witness of love for Christ, which the Church is in great need of. Thus faith is expressed through the joyful and trusting experience of God's preferential love for the simple, knowing that they are beloved children.

This way of living the faith can help us overcome the idea that it is our intellectual capacity that generates friendship with Jesus, ignoring that every man and every woman is capable of God, capable of knowing, loving and bearing witness to Him. Giving them a place can help us build a Church that is less rigid and more alive. Enhancing what is simple can paradoxically make us more profound and less superficial. This is a concrete way of proclaiming and bearing witness to a Gospel embodied in the humanity of each person, as the beloved child of the Father.

Furthermore, we would like to emphasize that we are not more fragile just because we live a condition of disability, rather because society (and the Church) have not yet found a way to respond to our needs for support.

3. Participation in the life of the Church

We who participated in the special synodal consultation enjoy a privileged situation. We are all representatives of realities that, in various ways, each bear a peculiar characteristic in their including persons with disabilities; some of us are priests, others permanent deacons, consecrated or extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist; others are responsible for international associations or, for a long time, have been members of them. Our witness is that of people who already participate in the life of the Church and, at all levels, are part of communities, and who show that inclusion is a feasible path and, in some ways, already underway.

In various dioceses, in numerous countries around the world, some people with disabilities have been involved and included in the synodal process at the diocesan level, and this has generated new expectations and dynamics. Moreover, being invited by the Holy See to participate in this special synodal consultation is an extremely significant novelty.

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[5] Cf. Message of the Holy Father Pope Francis on the Occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 20 November 2021.

Indeed, an important change is taking place in the Church and society. We are beginning to feel like we are no longer those " 'hidden exiles' who are treated as foreign bodies in society[6]", nor are we people who "exist without belonging or participating", instead, we experience not being "just cared for", rather "actively participating in the civil and ecclesial community".

In fact, for the past several decades, our participation in the life and mission of the Church has become more real and effective in many parts of the world. After much effort and as a result of a new ecclesial awareness, architectural barriers in churches and church buildings have often been eliminated, tools to facilitate communication for people with hearing and visual impairments have been incorporated, and forms of discriminatory and paternalistic treatment have been overcome.

Participating in the life of one's church community remains, however, conditioned by the presence of material and immaterial barriers. For this reason, it is necessary that church communities work to put into place *reasonable accommodations* that can make the participation of people with disabilities possible. A progressive journey is needed to prepare each reality of the parish community for welcoming.

4. The pressing need for a change of mindset: "us," not "them."

It is essential that everything pertaining to inclusion is no longer just related to the particular sensitivity of some people, but rather it should be the result of a change in mentality, culture, and outlook, so that each person is seen in his or her dignity as a person and as a child loved by God the Father.

Recognizing that we are all part of the same vulnerable and fragile humanity that Christ took upon Himself and made holy, eliminates any arbitrary distinction between "us" and "them" and opens the door to the full participation of each baptized person in the life of the Church. Each baptized person is a "temple of the Holy Spirit" and is thus enabled to bring him or herself to fullness, according to the gifts of grace that God grants. They are certainly different gifts, but to each one grace is given in fullness.

In this perspective - that of knowing that grace dwells in everyone equally - it is necessary to overcome any paternalistic attitude toward those who experience a condition of disability and to overcome the idea that we must be taken care of exclusively. Unfortunately, this is still a widespread approach that is expressed as sympathy, pity, and continuously considering us as "objects" of ecclesial attention and not "subjects." This is why there is an urgent need for a change of attitude that helps to grasp everyone's potential.

Indeed, in an inclusive community, each person walks his or her own path of conversion. Recognizing one's limitations and fragilities, people are led to walk alongside others without feeling superior, inferior or different, rather as brothers and sisters and fellow travelers. People with

[6] Fratelli Tutti, 78

disabilities are faithful called to conversion like anyone else and not "already saints" or "sufferers," or "Christs on the Cross" because of their condition of disability. We too are called to participate in the life of the Church. This also requires work of evangelization, since the proclamation of salvation of the Gospel of Jesus has not reached them all yet.

5. The obstacles.

From the contributions gathered, however, it appears that there are still quite a few obstacles to full inclusion. Many people with disabilities participate in the life of the Church in much more limited ways: some are completely excluded, while others are limited to the participation that an institutionalized life allows them. There are many adults who have not received the sacraments of Christian initiation or who receive no pastoral attention.

One of the problems most commonly encountered is that of accessibility. It is either the presence of physical barriers on entering churches or the lack of materials translated into Braille or the absence of sign language translators. The lack of priests capable of receiving confession in sign language means that the vast majority of deaf people are excluded from the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The matter of accessibility also comes up with regard to people with cognitive disabilities for whom no guidance or aids are available in AAC (augmentative and alternative communication), easy reading or other tools aimed at encouraging active and communicative participation.

On the contrary, to continue distinguishing between "us" and "them" and denying the common baptismal dignity and the sharing of the same human nature is the source of continued discrimination. In fact, as far as people with disabilities are concerned, the throwaway culture assumes the contours of discrimination. It stems - as the Pope explained - from the statement "You are not like me[7]" and continues, unfortunately, to be present even in the life of the Church.

Particularly from the contributions gathered, it appears that very often people with disabilities are not listened to or, at least, their voices are never really taken seriously. This is the experience of some national synodal processes in which there was participation at the local level, yet none of the specific contributions presented were reflected in their final reports. Also for this reason, as well as to prevent the synod from being yet another missed opportunity, the present consultation is of particular relevance.

A similar inability to listen to the demands and desires of people with disabilities means that many of us are forced to live, against our own will or without anyone having bothered to find a way to ask us for our opinion on the matter, within totalizing institutions. These are places, not infrequently run by church-related entities, in which the person's will is rarely taken into account

[7] Meeting of the Holy Father Pope Francis to the Participants in the Convention for Persons with Disabilities, promoted by the Italian Episcopal Conference, 11 June 2016.

and in which some expressions of the individual's freedom often lack. One does not have the opportunity of choosing where and with whom they live, whether they can or cannot go out and when, whether one's privacy is respected, and in many cases, not even to attend religious services.

Despite the fact that the recent Magisterium is very clear on this matter and, not long ago, the Pope stated that «*no one can deny the sacraments to persons with disabilities*[8]», cases in which they are denied still occur. The reasons range from prejudice regarding the ability to understand the nature of the Sacrament, to the pointlessness of offering reconciliation to those who are already atoning for their sin through their own suffering, to prejudice regarding the ability to express final consent or to the limited study of pastoral care that uses "all the senses" to make communication easier.

There are cultures that brand disability as a fault; they marginalize and severely discriminate individuals and families who are affected by it. In some parts of the world, moreover, disability is considered the result of evil spells or witchcraft, with obvious serious harm to families who are forced to leave their homes and lands because of the social stigma they face. Furthermore, Western culture also "marginalizes and severely discriminates" when it ensures that children with disabilities are not born. "Eugenic" abortion, perpetrated that is to prevent the birth of a son or daughter with suspected disabilities, is among the primary reasons behind the practice of abortion. Unfortunately, this mentality is now widespread even among many Catholics.

From the contributions gathered, it also emerges how unfortunately there is abuse, both physical and psychological, that occurs in different contexts, but that are more frequent within totalizing institutions. The cases of abuse of vulnerable people inflicted by religious personnel or within church-owned facilities are particularly distressing.

The forms of discrimination listed - the lack of listening, the violation of the right to choose where and with whom to live, refusing the Sacraments, the accusation of witchcraft, abuse - and others, describe the culture of rejection toward people with disabilities. They do not emerge by chance, rather they stem from the same root: the idea that the lives of people with disabilities are worth less than that of others.

6. What does the Holy Spirit ask of the Church?

In order to overcome discrimination and begin a journey of inclusion, a change of paradigm is necessary, starting with a theological in-depth study that can clearly and strongly explicate the dignity of the person with disabilities as being equal to every other human being, promoting his or her full participation in the life of the Church. Gradually theologians with disabilities are emerging in

[8] Message of the Holy Father Pope Francis on the Occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 20 November 2021.

this regard, who with great sensitivity, are exploring these issues, and it is necessary to listen to what they have to say. This may lead to a conversion that can and must extend to every aspect of Church life. It is a journey that in some parts of the world the Church is already making, but which - elsewhere - still encounters numerous obstacles, particularly where it is the very culture that gets in the way.

It is necessary that this renewal acquire visibility and that people with disabilities, according to their expertise and experience, participate in the governance and mission of the Church at all levels (dicasteries, dioceses, parishes and communities). In order to avoid any paternalistic or misleading approach, we specifically request that people with disabilities be included in the various organizations dedicated to people with disabilities. What affects us should not be decided and discussed without our participation.

It would be especially significant if one or more people with disabilities could be invited to the upcoming Synod on Synodality as observers.

Thus, on the one hand, it is necessary to be able to grasp the gifts of each individual, finding ways and means for each person to express them; on the other hand, each person with a disability must be able to make his or her own personal journey so as not to withdraw into him or herself, and be able to cast his or her gaze on the gifts he or she has received from the Lord and rejoice in the diversity of the gifts of others.

7. The joy of being able to give oneself to others.

People with disabilities are not simply people in need but, like everyone else, we are called to give to others; we cannot just strive for justice and inclusion for ourselves, but we must be able to look and go beyond, to live our lives to the fullest.

Some have the desire to give themselves to others, others are instead called to understand that they can give their time and skills. Helping others and giving glory to God with one's life is the best and most concrete way to overcome one's personal difficulties, feeling free and capable of loving. People with disabilities can thus bear witness that, like every other person in the community, we are valuable resources, not exceptions or "special" people, but active protagonists with the enthusiasm and joy of proclaiming the Gospel.

8. The joy of the Gospel

The lives of people with disabilities have been, and still are, all too often associated with the idea of suffering. Often we are seen as a burden to the families in which we live, some wonder what the point is of giving birth to a life that will be marked by pain, others - even - point to suffering as a particular mission to which we are particularly called. Disability and suffering appear to be linked in an inseparable pair.

Yet, from the experience of all of us who have participated in this synod consultation, it strongly emerges that suffering is not a sentence and that our ecclesial experience is very often marked by joy. This is a unanimous testimony of all those who are on a journey together with people with disabilities, particularly those with cognitive disabilities. It is a confirmation of how true it is, for each person and without difference, that «the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus» and that «those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew» (EG 1).

In the experience of faithful people with disabilities, life is not simply loss or suffering, since disability can give rise to a new life, a new horizon of meaning, which becomes light that illuminates the path. As Pope Francis stated, "The Gospels show that whenever persons with disabilities met Jesus, their lives changed profoundly, and they became his witnesses".[9]

Below are the signatures of those participating in the consultation

André Haurine	France	Pastorale des personnes handicapées Conférence des Évêques de France
Annunziata Coppedè	Italy	Federazione Italiana Superamento Handicap
Antonietta Pantone	Italy	Foi et Lumiere International
Bernadette Cabaging	Philippines	Archdiocese of Manila Ministry on Persons with Disabilities
Claire-Marie Rougier	France	Pastorale des personnes handicapées Conférence des Évêques de France
Cristina Kozielska	Poland	
Elena Andrés Fuero	Spain	Área de Pastoral y catequesis para personas con discapacidad Conferencia Episcopal Española
Elio Angione	Italy	Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII
Enrique Alarcón Garcia	Spain	Fraternidad Cristiana Intercontinental de Personas con Discapacidad (FRATER)
Giulia Cirillo	Italy	Comunità di Sant'Egidio

[9] Message of the Holy Father Pope Francis on the Occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 20 November 2021.

Inés del Carmen Bustos Hermosilla	Chile	Sub Comisión de Catequesis con Personas en situación de Discapacidad (PsD) Conferencia Episcopal de Chile (C.E.C.H.)
João da Costa Antunes Junio	Brazil	Pastoral da Pessoa com Deficiência Arquidiocese de São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro
João Pereira	Portugal	European Platform of Self-Advocates
Justin Glyn	Australia	Provincia Australiana della Compagnia di Gesù
Luz Elena Beacamonte Zamora	Mexico	Deaf Catholic Youth Initiative for the Americas
Matthew Hurst	UK	The Kairos Forum
Matthew Nyumah	Liberia	African Disability Foundation
Maximilien Mornet	France	Un sens a ma vue
Michelangelo Patanè	Italy	Movimento Apostolico Ciechi
Miguel Costa Duarte	Portugal	Serviço Pastoral a Pessoas com Deficiência Conferência Episcopal Portuguesa
Monika Fuhrberg	Austria	Menschen mit Behinderungen Katholischen Kirche Kärnten
Nadine Widmer	Argentina	Area Catequesis Especial, Junta Nacional de Catequesis Conferencia Episcopal Argentina (C.E.A.)
Nolan Smith	USA	National Catholic Partnership on Disability
Olena Kuts	Ukraine	ONG Emmaus
Patrice de Seauve	France	Office Chrétien des personnes Handicapées
Peter Arndt	Australia	Disability Projects Office Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference (A.C.B.C.)
Peter Hepp	Germany	Referat Inklusive Pastoral Deutsche Bischofskonferenz
Rita Minischetti	Italy	Servizio Nazionale per la pastorale delle persone con disabilità Conferenza Episcopale Italiana
Roberto Addazzi	Italy	Comunità di Capodarco
Stefano Toschi	Italy	Associazione "Beati noi"

Valentina Bonafede	Italy	Associazione la Nostra Famiglia
Véronique Champenois	France	Petites Sœurs Disciples de l'Agneau
Željkica Šemper	Croatia	Subcommitte for Persons with Disabilities Episcopal Conference of Croatia