



COMMITTEE FOR THE JUBILEE DAY
OF THE COMMUNITY
WITH PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

**PREPARATION
FOR THE JUBILEE DAY
3 DECEMBER 2000**

PART FOUR

***THE PERSON WITH DISABILITIES:
SUBJECT – RECEIVER
OF EVANGELISATION
AND CATECHESIS***

The richness of a person with disabilities constantly challenges the Church and society, calling them to open themselves to the mystery they present:

The person with disabilities has every right to be a subject-receiver of evangelisation and catechesis.

Disability is not a punishment, it is a place in which to meet “the mystery of faith” to be lived to the full in the daily life of the Church and society.

This paper is to help discover that the person with disabilities is a subject-receiver of evangelisation and catechesis.

It is in this spirit that we entrust this preparation to all of you, in view of the full integration and insertion of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church and society, to valorise the gifts they bring, to reconcile ourselves with them for failings in their regard in the spirit of the Great Jubilee and to encourage an attitude of caring, assistance and solidarity.

The Preparatory Committee

Rome 17 May 2000

The person with disabilities: subject- receiver of evangelisation and catechesis.

Introduction

“Every baptised person, by virtue of baptism itself, has the right to receive from the Church a teaching and formation which permits them to attain a true Christian life”.(CT 14).

Humanity alone, made up of men and women, is uncertain of its origin, its path, and its destiny.

This is why the Father sent the Son, who became man by the power of the Holy Spirit, to enlighten man on his “mystery” and free him from the slavery of sin, from violence and egoistic dominion over other living creatures and himself.

The Son instituted the Church which, guided by the Holy Spirit, continues in time Jesus’ mission to reveal the Father-Love.

She proclaims the mystery of God and his saving plan realised in Jesus, her lofty vision of man’s vocation, the style of evangelical life which communicates the joy of the Kingdom, the hope with which she is filled, the love she feels for mankind and for each of God’s creatures and she gives to all, by means of appropriate catechesis, the spiritual and human treasures of the rich heritage poured out on her by her Lord and Redeemer: the Sacraments, Word of God, life in the Church. In doing this she herself journeys towards the fullness of maturity in the faith: to contemplate God face to face (1 Cor 13,12) in perfect worship of Praise and Thanksgiving.

The Church welcomes into her midst persons with disabilities as a gift from God to manifest the gratuitousness of his love for humanity and she recognises their existence as a theological place in which God “works his wonders”.

She helps to overcome situations of isolation and rejection, of which many can be the victims, by helping everyone, including the persons with disabilities, to discover the inviolable dignity of every human person and of their rights: the right to life, to work, to education, the right to build a family, to take part in public life, the right to religious freedom.

She also knows that religious and cultural poverty, with the negation or limitation of rights, aggravates the pain and suffering of the condition of isolation, impoverishing the person just as the privation of temporal goods, or even more so.

The Church announces and explains the Word

The Church “exists to evangelise” (EN 14), to “carry the good news to every layer of humanity and, with its influence, transform from within, renew humanity itself” (EN 18). She, as Mother and Teacher, generates and teaches children conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of God (Cfr LG 64). To all she brings the announcement of the Saviour, and she introduces each person to the mystery of God revealed in Jesus and forms everyone integrally for full conversion to live in this way the universal call to holiness at the service of charity.

The Church, animated by the Spirit, is a teacher of the faith and she continues in the history of humanity the mission of Jesus the Master. She keeps the Gospel faithfully in her heart like Mary, (Lk 2,19)(Cfr LG 64; DV 10a), she proclaims it, celebrates it, lives and transmits it, through catechesis to all who decide to follow Jesus.

Through catechesis, she nourishes her children with her own faith inserting them into the ecclesial family. She offers them the Gospel in all its authenticity and purity, which, at the same time, is given to them as a suitable nourishment, culturally enriched and as the answer to the deepest longings of the human heart.

“The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ” (CT 5)

Catechesis favours a spirit of humility and simplicity (Mt 18,3), concern for the little ones (Mt 18,6) special attention for those who have strayed (Mt 18,15), brotherly correction (Mt 18,15), reciprocal forgiveness (Mt 18,22). Brotherly love brings together all these attitudes (Jn 13, 34).

Catechesis is a commitment for everyone, including the persons with disabilities

To make known the “mystery of faith” (CT 14) is the duty of every member of the ecclesial community. “Catechesis for all the baptised is an urgent task for the Christian community” (CEI Italian Bishops’ Conference: RdC 123)

Persons with disabilities must also be considered active participants for the realisation of the project of salvation entrusted by the Lord to the Church.

This calls for the full inclusion of people with disabilities in ecclesial life as responsible subjects, and with the same rights and duties and the same fundamental mission common to all the baptised, and also with a personal vocation to fulfil.

“They are called to celebrate in the sacraments their life of faith, according to the gifts received from God and the state in which they find themselves. In this way, by taking part in catechesis, liturgy and Church life, they may make their journey of faith and become active subjects of evangelisation, able, with their own gifts and charisma, to enrich the Christian community” (C. E. Emilia-Romagna 1981).

The universal nature of catechesis, both as first proclamation and as conversion and constant growth in the faith in life’s various phases, involves persons with disabilities for a proper experience of the mystery of faith to be lived within the Church itself and in the local ecclesial communities.

“Catechesis prepares full, conscious and active participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations” (CEI RdC 45). Each one with their own voice, with their own offering of self, praises the Father in Jesus through the Spirit. Persons with disabilities, despite their physical or mental disabilities, are capable of this worship of praise and the Father does not reject the praise of these beloved sons and daughters whom he has called to share in a sublime way the mystery of the Redemption of “the whole person, soul and body” realised through suffering and resurrection (John Paul II, *Teachings* 31/3/1084; cfr SD 3 and 19).

Not only participation in liturgical celebrations is the goal of catechesis but also participation in the life of the Church, her options and pastoral activities.

“Everyone has a place in the ecclesial Community. But he must find his proper place, in which he will

be respected, that is, in which his difficulties and his handicap, whatever they may be, will be taken into consideration.” (Brunot 1991).

Persons with disabilities speak to the Church

“And Jesus called a child, and placed him in their midst” (Mt, 182)

Persons with disabilities, being God’s gift to the Church and to all humanity, as indeed every person, are also Word of God, which we are all called to read and accept with a spirit of conversion. Reading this Word, helps us to overcome egoism, individualism, exclusion, accentuation on productivity. The presence of a person with disabilities helps others to change their mentality, to discover the important values in life, to assume consequential attitudes and behaviour, to make profound radical options.

The humanity of a person with disabilities brings us nearer to the “mystery” of the One who chose willingly and freely to be the victim of violence, rejection, isolation, exclusion, abandonment, psychological, affective, emotive and social betrayal, to be rejected by mankind but sustained by God (cfr Ps 41) in a plan for the redemption of all.

This presence is a motive and a sign of God’s mercy: the Lord is present in the Church, his house, and he gives the Church the ability to embrace the entire world starting precisely from the person with disabilities (cfr Mk 1,29-34), taking upon herself the wisdom of God’s mercy for the whole human family.

With their life the person with disabilities offers catechesis on love. The source of this love is God himself: *“I have called you by name: you are mine. You are precious in my eyes, because you are worthy of esteem and I love you”* (Is 43,1.4).

The message which persons with disabilities offer, can be a subject for reflection to modify stubborn mentalities; here are a few:

- the love of God the Father is infinite, even when humanity is wounded, mortified;
- the primary value of life appears even in difficult situations;
- we feel the need for an integral and efficient physical life, but there exists also the relativity of many of its aspects in a global and unitary vision of man;
- it is necessary to discover the profoundly human significance of suffering, limitation, the Cross, as a value of purification, liberation, growth and maturation.;
- to valorise solidarity, love and communion as the only path to reach out to brothers and sisters who suffer, who are lonely and to build for them and with them, authentic possibilities for a peaceful and happy life;
- the fulness of a life that is simple, essential, poor, humble can be the first and most important ideal of life for every mature person
- human science is necessary to eliminate the ills and violence we encounter in humanity to limit their vastness and cruelty with specific commitment.

By means of persons with disabilities the Church forms the Christian community and overcomes secular society’s mentality of productivity and exclusion; by welcoming and accepting them fully she affirms the dignity of every human life from the moment of conception in the mother’s womb.

Persons with disabilities are capable of demanding acts of charity; they are privileged witnesses of the redemption and living, ecclesial doxology of the Lord living forever and they build up the Body of Christ (Cfr SD 24).

Moreover, persons with disabilities are prophets of how each of us may become in the future, when physical strength diminishes, when we may lose our autonomy, become totally dependent: even then we will want to be treated with dignity and respect and still be responsible for our life and take part in community events.

The Church catechises persons with disabilities

“Every time you did this to the least of my brothers you did it to me” (Mt 25,40).

“Every Christian community considers those who suffer from some physical or mental

handicap or other form of disability, particularly when they are minors, persons dearly loved by the Lord. (DGpC 1997).

The position of persons with disabilities as “dearly loved” stimulates the Church to do more to help them live the “mystery of faith, offering catechesis suited to the needs and capacity of each individual, in order to lead them to an authentic, living and joyful experience of God within their own community, to achieve holiness.

The final goal of catechesis is holiness. “The Father’s love for these the weakest of his children and the constant presence of Jesus with His Spirit are a guarantee that every person, however limited is capable of growing in holiness”. (DGpC 1997). Catechesis therefore leads persons with disabilities to discover their call to live the discipleship in a responsible and active manner and to enrich the People of God with the gifts the Lord has entrusted to them to render resplendent his Bride.

Catechesis offered, adapted according to the receivers, must not remain in the margin of community pastoral work. “To avoid this, the community must be constantly informed and involved...the special nature of this catechesis demands from catechists particular competence and renders their service even more praiseworthy”. “Other types of catechists are urgently requested by human sectors of great sensitivity...*people who are disadvantaged, disabled*, in need of special catechetical pedagogy as well as full integration in the community.” (DGpC 1997).

Catechesis, even when “specialised” combines expertise with heart, with love. But above all it keeps ‘people with disabilities’ and ‘normal people’ united in the normal activities of the development of the catechetical programme in every parish. The basis of catechesis, which is to bear the desired fruits, is personal relationship, which the catechist, the ecclesial community and the family have with the person with disabilities, as they have with every person. “Those who commendably dedicate themselves to the service of the disabled should have scientific knowledge of their disabilities, but they should also comprehend with their hearts the person who bears the handicap” (*Holy See 1981*, n. 13).

Motives for a community Jubilee Day with persons with disabilities

“The whole town had gathered in front of the door”. (Mk 1,33).

The Lord Jesus offered himself as a victim to human violence, the fruit of sin and abuse of freedom, that his Church might be resplendent (Eph 5, 25-27). The reality of sin is always present in the Church, the Body of Christ; this is why sometimes her members make choices, which fail to reflect the will of their “Head”.

Urged on by the vital impulse of the Spirit, the Church has the courage to examine herself and recognise her failure to promote the life of persons with disabilities. This Jubilee Day is a time for penance and for reconciliation on the part of the Church with people with disabilities, but also to offer forgiveness on the part of people towards the Church with a liturgy, which reflects this aspect (cf. TMA 33). Therefore it is an opportunity to be reconciled with persons with disabilities and with their families.

This day is the beginning of acceptance and inclusion of persons with disabilities in every day life as persons with a special gift, not only for the fact that they are persons, but also because of the particular vocation to which they are called by God. With this act the Church becomes truly the house of the Father where each and every one finds fullness of love divine and human.

It is a day to overcome with concrete and significant gestures, through powerful witness, disability as separation, distance, diversity and to see persons with disabilities as persons filled with riches and humanity.

The celebration intends to rediscover guidelines and directives of the documents of the Church’s teaching, which in many local Churches are not known, rarely studied, rarely assimilated, rarely put into practice. Therefore it is an opportunity to put into practice these indications without hesitation, according to local situations and cultures for the full valorisation and inclusion of persons with disabilities at all levels of ecclesial and civil life.

Local Churches, which for some time now have worked with success in this sector, have an opportunity to make a gift of their experience and reflections to other Churches that have still before them a lengthy task for the full integration of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church and society. While they are stimulated by the jubilee day to continue along the path on which they have already embarked.

During this jubilee day, attention will be given to the celebration of the Sacraments, as well as the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation both to persons with disabilities and to their families, some of whom may have never heard the proclamation of Jesus or heard it in a distorted manner.

The day is an opportunity for study, reflection, and initiatives on the part of local Churches and parishes to focus attention on the person with disabilities; it is because of this Jubilee day that the Churches and communities are able embrace everyone: *“the quality of a society is measured by the respect it shows towards the weakest its members”* (John Paul II, March 31, 1984), (cf Mk 1,30-34).

This day intends to stimulate a mentality, which will penetrate “centres” of religious, civil, social political and economic formation to eliminate the “culture of death” and proclaim the “culture of life”. In this regard, social-ecclesial involvement and witness of life lived and committed by persons with disabilities and their families are privileged ways for the transformation and growth of society.

It is an opportunity for self-education in the parish community: it will help see persons with disabilities with serenity and trust and overcome fear and diffidence in their regard. Therefore the stimulation which the parish receives, makes it grow so it will become a welcoming community free of ideological, mental or psychological barriers; beyond demolishing architectonic and communicative barriers, it sees these persons as a special gift from God, with Christ’s triple ministry, priestly, royal and prophetic.

Testimony

Prayer for forgiveness for abuse of human rights:

“Let us pray for all the men and women in the world, especially for minors who are victims of abuse, for the poor, the alienated, the disadvantaged; let us pray for those are most defenceless, the unborn killed in their mother’s womb or even exploited for experimental purposes by those who abuse the promise of biotechnology and distort the aims of science.

“God our Father, you always hear the cry of the poor. How many times have Christians themselves not recognised you in the hungry, the thirsty and the naked, in the persecuted, the imprisoned, and in those incapable of defending themselves, especially in the first stages of life. For all those who have committed acts of injustice by trusting in wealth and power and showing contempt for the “little ones” who are so dear to you, we ask your forgiveness: have mercy on us and accept our repentance.”(Pope John Paul II, 12 March 2000)

Testimony of a mother

“I have three wonderful boys: Francesco, Vincenzo and Gabriele. The youngest, Gabriele, began to be unwell at the age of two and without knowing why, my husband and I suddenly found him in a deep coma. In those terrible moments I prayed constantly to Mary for a miracle but our son continued to suffer. Gradually she directed my gaze to her Son on the cross who did not eliminate his suffering, although it was in his power, he made it sublime in the greatest gesture of love in the history of all times. This knowledge made me feel uncomfortable that I had asked for a miracle: I wanted to see things more clearly. I began first to “watch” and then “listen” to Mass, listening to the Word gradually led me to “participate” in the celebration of the Eucharist, and slowly my life began to change under the powerful healing effect of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. My days lived with Christ led me to experience the best Comforter: the Holy Spirit. In this new splendid adventure I experienced the maternal presence of the Church. Many theologians today say that the only answer to atheism is the Trinity. God cannot be an anonymous God, a God each can fashion to suit his own needs and culture. Nor can he be a God who enjoys looking down from above, distributing joys and sorrows simply to test our faith. God, as Scripture says, is Father always present among his people, whom he loved so much as to give his only Son, who came to share our human condition and promised to be with us always through the “Comforter”.

After “meeting” the Most Holy Trinity I have a supernatural experience of joy and suffering; in fact in the meantime it was discovered that Gabriele’s illness was a malignant cancer. It is certainly not the suffering I experience which makes me happy, quite the contrary, there are times when I am afraid of what may happen. But it is knowing that this immense pain, in the light of Christ, has a meaning. It is something like giving birth, the pain is strong but you are bringing a child into the world! In this case the Son who is born is our salvation.

In this marvellous adventure, the warmth we found in our parish community and then “journeying” together and praying together helped us to get up after every fall, to find a way out of those times when we rejected everything and everyone. In our community we met people who take you by the hand and make you feel they are with you, not speaking much, not giving advice, not doing very much, just sharing with you the difficult but wonderful pilgrimage towards the house of the Father.

(NB: *this mother was radiant on the day in which Gabriele made his First Holy Communion*).

