Inclusie mag geen slogan zijn

Address to a group of disabled people on the occasion of International Day of People with Disabilities

Pope Francis
3 december 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am pleased to meet you today, on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. I thank Msgr. Giuseppe Baturi for his words, and also for the efforts of churches in Italy to maintain lively attention to persons with disabilities, with active and inclusive pastoral action. Promoting the recognition of the dignity of every person is a constant responsibility of the Church; it is the mission of continuing over time the closeness of Jesus Christ to every man and woman, especially the most fragile and vulnerable. The Lord is close.

To welcome people with disabilities and to respond to their needs is a duty of the civil and ecclesial community, because “even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature” (Saint John Paul II, Message to participants in the International Symposium on “The Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person, 8 January 2004).

This was how Jesus looked upon the people he met: with a gaze of tenderness and mercy, especially towards those who were excluded from the attention of the powerful and even the religious leaders of his time. Therefore, every time the Christian community transforms indifference into proximity – this is a true conversion: transforming indifference into proximity and closeness – every time the Church does this and transforms exclusion into belonging, she fulfils her proper prophetic mission. Indeed, it is not enough to defend people’s rights; it is also necessary to work to respond to their existential needs, in their different dimensions, bodily, psychical, social and spiritual. Every man and every woman, in fact, in whatever situation they find themselves, is the bearer not only of rights that must be recognized and guaranteed, but also even deeper demands, such as the need to belong, to relate to others and to cultivate the spiritual life to the point of experiencing its fullness, and to bless the Lord for this unique and wonderful gift.

To generate and support inclusive communities – this word is important, inclusive, always – means, then, eliminating any discrimination and genuinely satisfying the need for every person to feel they are recognized and feel part. Indeed, there is no inclusion if the experience of fraternity and reciprocal communion is missing. There is no inclusion if this remains a slogan, a formula to use in politically correct speeches, a banner to be appropriated. There is no inclusion if there is a lack of conversion in the practices of coexistence and relationships.

It is a duty to guarantee persons with disabilities access to buildings and meeting places, to make languages accessible and to overcome physical barriers and prejudices. However, this is not enough. It is necessary to promote a spirituality of communion, so that every person feels part of a body, with his or her unique personality. Only in this way can every person, with their limits and gifts, feel encouraged to do their part for the good of the entire ecclesial body and for the good of the society as a whole.

I hope that all Christian communities may be places where “belonging” and “inclusion” do not remain words to be uttered on certain occasions, but become an aim of ordinary pastoral action. In such a way, we will be able to be credible when we proclaim that the Lord loves everyone, that he is salvation for all and invites everyone to

the banquet of life, without exclusion.

It strikes me greatly when the Lord narrates the story of that man who had prepared a feast for his son's wedding and the guests did not come (cf. Mt 22:1-14). He calls the servants and says: "Go to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find". The Lord asks for everyone: young, old, sick, healthy, small, great, sinners and without sin… everyone, everyone, everyone! This is the Lord: everyone, without exclusion. We must learn this. We are, at times, a little tempted to go along the road of exclusion. No: inclusion. The Lord has taught us this: everyone. "But this one is ugly, this one is like that…". Everyone, everyone. Inclusion.

Dear brothers and sisters, at this time, in which we hear daily bulletins of war, your witness is a tangible sign of peace, a sign of hope for a more humane and fraternal world, for everyone. Continue on this path! I bless you from my heart and I pray for you. Thank you for what you do, thank you! And I ask you to pray for me. Thank you!