



PASTORAL LETTER ON THE INCLUSION OF PERSONS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES
12TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 19TH AND 20TH JUNE 2021

Over the last few days, 'Learning Disabilities Week' has been observed nationally. Indeed, throughout the year there are several days and weeks that are assigned to heighten awareness in civil society of various disabilities and health issues. There is a danger though that these public information events come and go without a lasting impact. As Catholics, our concern for all men and women derives not from these civil awareness days but springs from the heart of our Christian faith.

Our Lord Jesus Christ brought hope and healing to those who found themselves marginalised by poverty, sickness, and disability. As disciples of the Lord, and in imitation of him, we are called to provide hope and healing to others; and this demands the personal witness of each of us. The Gospel teaches us that all human life is sacred, that every person is created in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, a person's worth and dignity cannot be diminished by any physical or mental condition.

In Pope Francis' message for the last 'International Day of Persons with Disabilities'ⁱ, he stated that if our world is to honour the human dignity which is proper to all men and women, then *"the inclusion of the vulnerable must also entail efforts to promote their active participation"*ⁱⁱ in our society.

Certainly, a good degree of progress has been made to improve the inclusion of people living with disabilities in the workplace and other areas of society, yet many still feel that *"they exist without belonging and without participating"*ⁱⁱⁱ. Inclusive laws and processes are not enough. People who live with disabilities need to have not only legal rights and opportunities, but they also need to feel they truly belong to their community and participate in its life.

"From now onwards, therefore, we do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh ...And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here" said St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. In the newness of life brought to the world by Christ's life, death and resurrection, we have been given a new set of standards. As disciples of Christ, we are called to look at things not by the standards which the world uses but to see far beyond them.

Pope Francis has expressed this radical viewpoint in these words: *"We are called to recognize in every person with disabilities, even complex and serious disabilities, a unique contribution to the common good through their original life stories. Recognizing the dignity of each person, knowing that it does not depend on the functionality of the five senses. The Gospel teaches us this conversion. We need to develop antibodies against a culture that considers some lives first-class and others second-class: this is a social sin!"*^{iv}

Just like every baptized person, you who live with disabilities have been given a share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your personal call to holiness means that you too, according to your talents and capacity, are called to use your unique God-given gifts to build up Christ's Body, the Church. Without your witness, the Body of Christ is incomplete.

Over the last few months, therefore, our Diocese has fostered additional ways for people living with disabilities to participate more fully in the Church's worship and mission, including engagement with the scriptures, catechesis for children with a variety of disabilities and special needs, and the integration of the 'Faith and Light'^v groups into our parishes.

There is though, so much more we can do. And so, with this in mind a framework^{vi} has been developed which a parish community can use to identify what is being done well already and what other practical changes could be undertaken to improve further the inclusion in its life and worship of persons with disabilities.

As the pandemic restrictions gradually ease and our parish communities gather again more fully, may our parishes be a welcoming home of hope and healing for everyone who visits them.

**✠ Marcus
Bishop of Leeds**

Given at Leeds on the 10th June 2021 and appointed to be read at the celebrations of Mass, published through parish electronic distribution systems and websites, and made available to be taken away from the churches and chapels of the Diocese on the weekend of 19th and 20th June 2021. I make a special request that copies be sent or given to the housebound, and to others known within the parish who are unable to attend Mass.

ⁱ Each year, December 3rd is the 'International Day of Persons with Disabilities'. It is observed by the Holy See and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. The day will also be part of an annual week of prayer (27th November to 3rd December) for people living with disabilities in the Diocese of Leeds.

ⁱⁱ Message of Pope Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Message of Pope Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 2019

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Faith and Light groups include people with learning disabilities or learning difficulties, their families and friends, who meet together on a regular basis in a Christian spirit, to share friendship, pray together, and celebrate life. For more information: www.faithandlight.org.uk.

^{vi} Caritas Leeds has developed a framework for use in our parishes to review their provision for people living with disabilities. It has two distinct sections, the first focusing on people and the other on the environment: www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/disabilities-forum.