



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service

15 November 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

'Us' not 'Them' – encouraging active participation

Friday 3 December 2021 marks the International Day of People with Disability and provides an opportunity to celebrate the lives, contributions and achievements of the 4.4 million Australians with disability. The day aims to raise awareness and take steps towards a more inclusive and accessible community.

The United Nations announced the official theme this year as: *“Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world”*.

In the Catholic Church, on 5 December 2021 we celebrate the Second Sunday of Advent. In the Gospel of Luke that day, we are reminded to “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” (Lk 3:4).

In his 2020 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship, Pope Francis calls us to ensure the “active participation (of people with disabilities) in the civil and ecclesial community”. Doing so “will gradually contribute to the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person”, he wrote (FT, 98).

Like the Good Samaritan, Pope Francis reminds us that we are all travelling on a common road through life. It is on that road that we encounter wounded people, including those who because of disabilities are isolated or overlooked.

During the recent first general assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, I felt inspired to urge the Church to lead the way in our society with regard to all people with disabilities, who with their families, often find themselves on the margins. I called for the Church to recognise and reach out to those with disabilities as they are our sisters and brothers, loved by God, and rightly have a place in our communities.

Catholic social teaching and the theology of disability offer a richer and more human basis for care of people with disabilities. These identify:

- the problem of disability is not so much the impairment but the ignorance, intolerance, injustice and exclusion that misses the dignity and humanity of the person;
- that people with a disability are not just the object of care but the agents of their own life, and need to be heard;
- that it is necessary to recognise the vast diversity of the experiences of disability;

- that equity and inclusion require that people with disability have an equal opportunity to be recognised, accepted and make their own contribution to the common good.

I encourage parish communities to continue to promote a welcoming attitude among their people to the person with disabilities. This is more than attending to issues of physical accessibility. Each person in the community needs to be accepted as a brother and sister.

As Pope Francis said on the International Day of People with Disability last year, the presence of a brother or sister with a disability will help the community “to develop attitudes and acts of solidarity, and service towards them and their families. Our aim should be to speak no longer about ‘them’, but rather about ‘us’”.

To celebrate the presence and contribution of our brothers and sisters with disabilities in our community, their families and supporters, a **Prayer Service** has been prepared by the Office for Justice, Ecology and Peace to mark the 2021 International Day of People with Disability. I invite you to share this resource with your communities, mindful of the unique gifts we all bring as we encounter God through each other.

In closing, may I encourage you to participate in the current XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops through the Diocesan Consultation Phase that is open to all Australian Catholics to promote a sense of communion and journeying together as initiated by Pope Francis.

The theme for the Synod is “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” Information on the Listening and Discerning Guides, Reflection Guides and online portal for submissions can be found by accessing:

<https://www.catholic.org.au/synodalchurch>

And for people with disabilities in our communities, may their voices be heard, their experiences honoured and their gifts flourish.

Yours sincerely in Christ,



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