



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO MEMBERS OF THE APOSTOLIC MOVEMENT OF THE BLIND (MAC)
AND THE LITTLE MISSION FOR THE DEAF AND MUTE**

*Paul VI Hall
Saturday, 29 March 2014*

Video

Dear Brothers and Sisters, welcome!

I greet the *Movimento Apostolico Ciechi* [Apostolic Movement for the Blind], who have sponsored this event in connection with their Day of Sharing; and I greet the *Piccola Missione per i Sordomuti* [Little Mission for the Deaf and Mute], which deals with many issues of the hearing impaired in Italy. I thank the two leaders for their words; and I convey my greetings to the members of the *Unione Italiana Ciechi e Ipovedenti* [Italian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired], who are also participating in this meeting.

I would like to reflect with you briefly on the theme: “*Witnesses of the Gospel for a culture of encounter*”.

My first observation is that this phrase ends with the word “encounter”, but at the beginning it presupposes *another encounter, one with Christ*. Indeed, to be witnesses of the Gospel, we have to have *encountered* Him, Jesus. Those who truly know Him become his witnesses. Like the Samaritan woman, as we read last Sunday: that woman encountered Jesus, spoke with him, and her life changed: she returned to her people and said: “Come, see a man who told all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (cf. Jn 4:29).

A witness to the Gospel is one who has encountered Jesus Christ, who knows him, or better, who feels *known by Him*, recognized, respected, loved, forgiven, and this encounter has deeply

touched him, filled him with a new joy, given life a new meaning. And this shines through, it's passed on to others.

I recalled the Samaritan woman because this is a clear example of the type of person Jesus loved to encounter, to make witnesses of: *persons who are marginalized, excluded, scorned*. She was all of these both as a woman and a Samaritan because Samaritans were very much scorned by the Jews. But let us think of the many that Jesus wanted to meet, especially people marked by *illness* and *disability*, in order to heal them and restore them to full dignity. It is very important that these same people become witnesses to a new attitude, that we can call the *culture of encounter*. A typical example is that of the person born blind, who we will see in tomorrow's Gospel reading (Jn 9:1-41) at Mass.

This man was blind from birth and was ostracized based on the false idea that he had been stricken with a divine punishment. Jesus radically rejected this manner of thinking as truly blasphemous, and performed "the work of God" for the blind man, giving him sight. But the remarkable thing is that this man, *because of what happened to him*, he became a witness of Jesus, and of his work, which is the *work of God*, of life, of love, of mercy.

Meanwhile the leader of the Pharisees, from the safety of their position, judged both him and Jesus as "sinners". The healed blind man defended Jesus with disarming simplicity, and at the end professed his faith in Him and shared in his fate: Jesus was excluded, and he was excluded as well. But in reality, that man joined a new community based on faith in Jesus and fraternal love.

These are two opposing cultures. The culture of encounter and the culture of exclusion. The culture of prejudice; because it criticized and excludes. Precisely because of their fragility, their limitations, the sick and disabled can become witnesses of the encounter: the encounter with Jesus, which opens them to life and faith, and to encounter others, with the community. Indeed, *only those who recognize their own fragility, their own limitations, can build fraternal and solid relationships* in the Church and in society.

Dear friends, I thank you for coming and I encourage you to continue forward on this path that you are already on. The members of the Apostolic Movement for the Blind, who enable the charism of Maria Motta, a woman full of faith and apostolic spirit, to bear fruit. Likewise, you of the Little Mission for the Deaf and Mute, in the wake of Fr Giuseppe Gualandi. And all of you present here, allow yourselves to encounter Jesus: only He truly knows the heart of man, only He can unlock and free it from fruitless pessimism, and open it to life and to hope.

Before imparting the blessing to those present, the Pontiff said the following words extemporaneously:

And now let us look to Our Lady. In her the first encounter was ineffable: the encounter between God and humanity. Let us ask Our Lady that she may help us to promote this culture of encounter. And let us pray to her with a *Hail Mary*...