



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
ON THE DIGNITY AND RIGHTS
OF THE MENTALLY DISABLED PERSON**

To the participants in the International Symposium on

The Dignity and Rights of the

*Mentally Disabled Person*¹. You have gathered in Rome, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, experts in the branches of human knowledge, and priests, Religious and lay people committed to pastoral life, experts in theology, to examine the sensitive problems of the human and Christian education of people suffering from mental impairment. This Symposium, organized by the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, constitutes an ideal conclusion to the *European Year of Disabled Persons*. It comes in continuity with the rich and plentiful ecclesial teaching that we now have and that elicits the effective commitment of the People of God on a vast scale, at various levels and in its various branches.² The starting point for every reflection on disability is rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology: 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. Indeed, human beings, independently of the conditions in which they live or of what they are able to express, have a unique dignity and a special value from the very beginning of their life until the moment of natural death. The disabled person, with all the limitations and suffering that scar him or her, forces us to question ourselves, with respect and wisdom, on the mystery of man. In fact, the more we move about in the dark and unknown areas of human reality, the better we understand that it is in the more difficult and disturbing situations that the dignity and grandeur of the human being emerges. The wounded humanity of the disabled challenges us to recognize, accept and promote in each one of these brothers and sisters of ours the incomparable value of the human being created by God to be a son in the Son.³ The quality of life in a community is measured largely by its commitment to assist the weaker and needier members with respect for their dignity as men and women. The world of rights cannot only be the prerogative of the healthy. People with disabilities must also be enabled to participate in social life as far as they can, and helped to fulfil all their physical, psychological and spiritual potential. Only by recognizing the rights of its weakest members can a society claim to be founded on law and justice: the disabled are not different from other people which is why, in recognizing and promoting their dignity and rights, we recognize and promote our own dignity and rights and those of each one of us. A society that made room only for its fully functional, completely autonomous and independent members, would be unworthy of the human being. Discrimination on the basis of effectiveness is just as disgraceful as racial, gender or religious discrimination. A subtle form of discrimination is also present in politics and educational projects that seek to conceal or deny the deficiencies of

disabled people by proposing lifestyles and objectives that do not correspond to their reality and turn out to be unjust and frustrating. Indeed, justice calls for continual and loving attention to the lives of others and a response to the special and different needs of every individual, taking into consideration his or her abilities and limitations.⁴ The diversity that is due to a person's disability can be integrated into his respective unique individuality, and relatives, teachers, friends and the whole of society must contribute to this. Thus, for disabled people, as for any other human being, it is not important that they do what others do but that they do what is truly good for them, increasingly making the most of their talents and responding faithfully to their own human and supernatural vocation. Recognition of their rights must be followed by a sincere commitment on the part of all to create practical living conditions, structures which provide support and legal protection that can respond to the needs and dynamics of the growth of disabled persons and of those who are involved in their situation, beginning with their families. Over and above any other consideration or individual or group interest, no effort must be spared in promoting the integral good of these people. Nor can they be denied the support and protection they need, even if this entails a greater financial and social burden. The mentally handicapped need perhaps more attention, affection, understanding and love than any other sick person: they cannot be left alone, unarmed and defenseless, as it were, in the difficult task of facing life.⁵ In this regard, the care of the emotional and sexual dimensions of disabled persons deserves special attention. This aspect is often ignored, glossed over and reduced or even dealt with ideologically. Instead, the sexual dimension is a constitutive dimension of the human being as such, created in the image of the God of Love and called from the outset to find fulfilment in the encounter with others and in communion. The premise for the emotional-sexual education of disabled persons is inherent in the conviction that their need for love is at least as great as anyone else's. They too need to love and to be loved, they need tenderness, closeness and intimacy. Unfortunately, the fact is that disabled persons find themselves living these legitimate and natural needs in a disadvantaged situation that becomes more and more obvious as they grow from infancy to adulthood. Despite the damage to the mind and the interpersonal dimension, disabled people seek authentic relationships in which they can find appreciation and recognition as persons. The experience of certain Christian communities has shown that an intense and stimulating community life, continuous and discreet educational support, the fostering of friendly contacts with properly trained people, the habit of channelling instincts and developing a healthy sense of modesty as respect for their own personal privacy, often succeeds in restoring the emotional balance of persons with mental disabilities and can lead them to live enriching, fruitful and satisfying interpersonal relationships. To show disabled persons that we love them means showing them that we value them. Attentive listening, understanding their needs, sharing their suffering, patience in guidance, are some of the ways to introduce the disabled into a human relationship of communion, to enable them to perceive their own value and make them aware of their capacity for receiving and giving love.⁶ There is no doubt that in revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of pain. In this world of ours that approves hedonism and is charmed by ephemeral and deceptive beauty, the difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problems as burdens to be removed or resolved as quickly as possible. Disabled people are, instead, living icons of the crucified Son. They reveal the mysterious beauty of the One who emptied himself for our sake and made himself obedient unto death. They show us, over and above all appearances, that the ultimate foundation of human existence is Jesus Christ. It is said, justifiably so, that disabled people are humanity's privileged witnesses. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance, a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God who became incarnate, who was crucified and rose for us.⁷ Dear participants in this Symposium, your presence and commitment witness to the world that God is always on the side of the lowly, the poor, the suffering and the marginalized. By making himself human and being born in the poverty of a

stable, the Son of God proclaimed in himself the blessedness of the afflicted and shared - in all things save sin - the destiny of man, created in his image. After Calvary, the Cross, embraced with love, becomes the way of life. It teaches each one of us that if we know how to travel with abandoned trust the exhausting, uphill road of human suffering, the joy of the Living Christ which surpasses every desire and every expectation will blossom for us and for our brothers and sisters. A special Blessing to everyone! *From the Vatican, 5 January 2004* **JOHN PAUL II**

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