

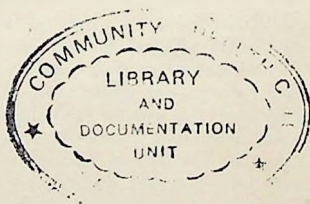
DOCUMENT FROM THE
VATICAN FOR THE
INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF
DISABLED PERSONS

CBCI, 1981

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Document from the
Vatican (Holy See) for the
International Year
of Disabled Persons



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Document of the Holy See for the International Year of Disabled Persons

To all who work for the disabled

From the very beginning the Holy See received favourably the United Nations' *initiative* of proclaiming 1981 "The International Year of Disabled Persons". These persons deserve the practical concern of the world community, both by reason of their numbers (it is calculated that they exceed four hundred million) and especially for their particular human and social condition. Therefore, in this noble enterprise, the Church could not fail to show her caring and watchful solicitude, for by her very nature, vocation and mission she has particularly at heart the lives of the weakest and most sorely tried brothers and sisters.

For this reason, the Church has followed with close attention everything that has been done up to the present time on behalf of the disabled on the legislative level, both national and international. Worthy of note in this regard are the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Disabled, and the Declaration concerning the Rights of the Mentally Retarded, as also the progress and future prospects of scientific and social research, plus the new proposals and initiatives of various sorts now being developed in this area. These initiatives show a renewed awareness of the duty of solidarity in this specific field of human suffering; also to be borne in mind is the fact that in the Third World countries the lot of the disabled is even more grave, and calls for closer attention and more careful consideration.

The Church fully associates herself with the initiatives and praiseworthy efforts being made in order to improve the situation of the disabled, and she intends to make her own specific contribution thereto. She does so, in the first place, through fidelity to the example and teaching of her Founder. For Jesus

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Christ showed special care for the suffering, in all the wide spectrum of human pain. During his ministry he embraced them with his merciful love, and he showed forth in them the saving power of the Redemption that embraces man in his individuality and totality. The neglected, the disadvantaged, the poor, the suffering and the sick were the ones to whom he specially brought, in words and actions, the proclamation of the Good News of God's Kingdom breaking into human history.

The community of Christ's disciples, following his example, has down the centuries caused to flourish works of extraordinary generosity, works that bear witness not only to faith and hope in God but also unshakable love and faith in the dignity of man, in the unrepeatable value of each individual human life, and in the transcendent dignity of those who are called into existence.

In their view of faith and in their concept of man, Christians know that in the disabled person there is reflected, in a mysterious way, the image and likeness which God himself impressed upon the lives of his sons and daughters. And as they remember that Christ himself mystically identified himself with the suffering neighbour and took as done to himself everything done for the least of his brethren (cf. Mt 25:31-46), Christians feel a call to serve, in him, those whom physical accidents have affected and disabled; and they are resolved not to omit any of the things that must be done, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, in order to alleviate their disadvantaged condition.

At this moment, one cannot fail to think, with lively gratitude, of all the communities and associations, all the men and women Religious and all the lay volunteers who spend themselves in work for the disabled, thus manifesting the perennial vitality of that love that knows no barriers.

It is in this spirit that the Holy See, while expressing its gratitude and encouragement for what has been done by those responsible for the common good, by the international Organizations and by all those who work for the handicapped, considers it useful to recall briefly a few principles that may be useful guides in dealing with the disabled, and also to suggest some practical points.

I Basic principles

1. The first principle, which is one that must be stated clearly and firmly, is that the disabled person (whether the disability be the result of a congenital handicap, chronic illness or accident, or from mental or physical deficiency, and whatever the severity of the disability) *is a fully human subject, with the corresponding innate, sacred and inviolable rights*. This statement is based upon the firm recognition of the fact that a human being possesses a unique dignity and an independent value, from the moment of conception and in every stage of development, whatever his or her physical condition. This principle, which stems from the *upright conscience* of humanity, must be made the inviolable basis of legislation and society.

Indeed, on reflection one may say that a disabled person, with the limitations and sufferings that he or she suffers in body and faculties, emphasizes the mystery of the human being, with all its dignity and nobility. When we are faced with a disabled person, we are shown the hidden frontiers of human existence, and we are impelled to approach this mystery with respect and love.

2. Since the person suffering from handicaps is a subject with full rights, he or she must be *helped to take his or her place in society in all aspects and at all levels, as far as is compatible with his or her capabilities*. The recognition of these rights and the duty of human solidarity, are a commitment and task to be carried out, and they will create psychological, social, family, educational and legislative conditions and structures that will favour the proper acceptance and complete development of the disabled individual.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Disabled states, in Section 3, that "disabled persons have the right to respect for their human dignity. Disabled persons, whatever the origin, nature and seriousness of their handicaps and disabilities, have the same fundamental rights as their fellow-citizens of the same age, which implies first and foremost the right to enjoy a decent life, as normal and full as possible".

3. *The quality of a society and a civilization are measured by the respect shown to the weakest of the members.* A perfect technological society which only allowed fully functional members and which neglected, institutionalized or, what is worse, eliminated those who did not measure up to this standard or who were unable to carry out a useful role, would have to be considered as radically unworthy of man, however economically successful it might be. Such a society would in fact be tainted by a sort of discrimination no less worthy of condemnation than racial discrimination; it would be discrimination by the strong and "healthy" against the weak and the sick. It must be clearly affirmed that a disabled person is one of us, a sharer in the same humanity. By recognizing and promoting that person's dignity and rights, we are recognizing and promoting our own dignity and our own rights.

4. The fundamental approach to the problems connected with the sharing by the disabled in the life of society must be inspired by the *principles of integration, normalization and personalization*. The principle of *integration* opposes the tendency to isolate, segregate and neglect the disabled, but it also goes further than an attitude of mere tolerance. It includes a commitment to make the disabled person a subject in the fullest sense, in accordance with his or her capacities, in the spheres of family life, the school, employment, and, more generally, in the social, political and religious communities.

As a natural consequence there derives from this principle that of *normalization*, which signifies and involves an effort to ensure the complete rehabilitation of the disabled person, using all means and techniques now available, and, in cases where this proves impossible, the achievement of a living and working environment that resembles the normal one as much as possible.

Thirdly, the principle of *personalization* emphasizes the fact that in the various forms of treatment, as also in the various educational and social means employed to eliminate handicaps, it is always the dignity, welfare and total development of the handicapped person, in all his or her dimensions and physical, moral and spiritual faculties, that must be primarily considered,

protected and promoted. This Principle also signifies and involves the elimination of collectivized and anonymous institutions to which the disabled are sometimes relegated.

II Operative Lines

1. One cannot but hope that such statements as those of the Declaration cited will be given full recognition in the international and national communities, avoiding limiting interpretations and arbitrary exceptions and perhaps even unethical applications which end by emptying the statements of meaning and import.

Developments in science and medicine have enabled us today to discover in the foetus some defects which can give rise to future malformations and deficiencies. The impossibility at present of providing a remedy for them by medical means has led some to propose and even to practice the suppression of the foetus. This conduct springs from an attitude of pseudo-humanism, which compromises the ethical order of objective values and must be rejected by upright consciences. It is a form of behaviour which, if it were applied at a different age, would be considered gravely anti-human. Furthermore, the deliberate failure to provide assistance, or any act which leads to the suppression of the new-born disabled person, represents a breach not only of medical ethics but also of the fundamental and inalienable right to life. One cannot, at whim, dispose of human life, by claiming an arbitrary power over it. Medicine loses its title of nobility when, instead of attacking disease, it attacks life; in fact prevention should be against the illness, not against life. One can never claim that one wishes to bring comfort to a family, by suppressing one of its members. The respect, the dedication, the time and means required for the care of handicapped persons, even of those whose mental faculties are gravely affected, is the price that a society should generously pay in order to remain truly human.

2. A consequence of clear affirmation of this point is the duty to undertake more extensive and thorough research in order to overcome the cause of disabilities. Certainly much has been done in recent years in this field, but much more remains

to be done. Scientists have the noble task of placing their skill and their studies at the service of bettering the quality and defence of human life. Present developments in the fields of genetics, foetology, perinatology, biochemistry and neurology, to mention only some disciplines, permit us to foster the hope of noticeable progress. A unified effort of research will not fail, it is hoped, to achieve encouraging results in the not too distant future.

These initiatives of fundamental research and of application of acquired knowledge deserve therefore more decisive encouragement and more concrete support. It is the hope of the Holy See that International Institutions, the Public Powers in individual nations, research agencies, non-governmental Organizations and private Foundations will more and more foster research and allot the necessary funds for it.

3. The priority to be given to the prevention of disabilities should also make us reflect on the distressing phenomenon of the many persons that undergo stress and shock that disturb their psychic and interior life. Preventing these disabilities and fostering the health of the spirit signifies and implies unified and creative effort in favour of integral education, and an environment, human relations and means of communication in which the person is not damaged in his more profound needs and aspirations — in the first place moral and spiritual ones — and in which the person is not submitted to violence which can end by compromising his interior balance and dynamism. Spiritual ecology is needed as much as natural ecology.

4. When, notwithstanding the responsible and rigorous application of all the techniques and cures possible today, the disability cannot be remedied or reversed, it is necessary to seek and bring about all the remaining possibilities of human growth and of social integration which remain open for the person affected. Apart from the right to appropriate medical treatment, the United Nations Declaration enumerates other rights which have as their objective the most complete possible integration or reintegration into society. Such rights have very wide repercussions on the whole of the services which exist at present or

which must be developed, among which might be mentioned the organization of an adequate educational system, responsible professional training, counselling services and appropriate work.

5. One point seems to merit particular attention. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons affirms: "Disabled persons have the right to live with their families or with foster parents" (no. 9). It is extremely important that this right be put into effect. It is in the home, surrounded by loved ones, that a handicapped person finds the surroundings which are most natural and conducive to his development. Taking account of this primordial importance of the family for the development of the handicapped person and his integration into society, those responsible for sociomedical and orthopedagogical structures should make the family the starting point in planning their programmes and make it the principal dynamic force in the process of social care and integration.

6. From this viewpoint it is necessary to take into account the decisive importance which lies in the help to be offered at the moment that parents make the painful discovery that one of their children is handicapped. The trauma which derives from this can be so profound and can cause such a strong crisis that it shakes their whole system of values. The lack of early assistance or adequate support in this phase can have very unfortunate consequences for both the parents and the disabled person. For this reason one should not rest content with only making the diagnosis and then leaving the parents abandoned. Isolation and rejection by society could lead them to refuse to accept or, God forbid, to reject their disabled child. It is necessary therefore for families to be given great understanding and sympathy by the community and to receive from associations and public powers adequate assistance from the beginning of the discovery of the disability of one of their members.

The Holy See, conscious of the heroic strength of mind required of those families that have generously and courageously agreed to take care of, and even adopt, disabled children, wants to assure them of its appreciation and gratitude. The witness which these families render to the dignity, value and sacredness

of the human person deserves to be openly recognized and supported by the whole community.

7. When particular circumstances and special requirements for the rehabilitation of the disabled person necessitate a temporary stay or even a permanent one away from the family, the homes and institutions which take the family's place should be planned and should function in a way as near to the family model as is possible and should avoid segregation and anonymity. It must be arranged that during their stay in these centres, the bonds linking the disabled persons with their families and friends should be cultivated with frequency and spontaneity. Apart from professional competence, loving care and dedication of the parents, relatives and educators have obtained, as many have testified, results of unexpected effectiveness for the human and professional development of disabled persons. Experience has demonstrated—and this is an important point for reflection—that in a favourable and human family setting, full of deep respect and sincere affection, disabled persons can develop in surprising ways their human, and spiritual qualities and even, in their turn, bring others peace and joy.

8. The affective life of the disabled will have to receive particular attention. Above all when their handicap prevents them from contracting marriage, it is important, not only that they be adequately protected from promiscuity and exploitation, but that they also be able to find a community full of human warmth in which their need for friendship and love may be respected and satisfied in conformity with their inalienable moral dignity.

9. Handicapped children and young people obviously have the right to instruction. This will be assured them to the extent possible either through an ordinary school or a specialized school for people with their handicap. Where home schooling is required, it is hoped that the competent authorities will supply the family with the necessary means. Access to higher learning and opportune post-school assistance ought to be made possible and aid should be given for this purpose.

10. A particularly delicate moment in the life of the disabled person is the passage from school to placement in society or

professional life. In this phase the person needs particular understanding and encouragement from various sectors of the community. Public authorities should guarantee and foster with effective measures the right of disabled persons to professional training and work, so that they can be inserted into a professional activity for which they are qualified. Much attention should be focussed on working conditions, conditions, such as the assignment of jobs in accordance with the handicaps, just wages, and possibility of promotion. Highly recommended is advance information for employers regarding the employment, the situation and the psychology of the disabled. These encounter various hindrances in the professional sector: for example, a sense of inferiority about their appearance or possible productivity, worry about having accidents at work, etc.

11. Obviously, the disabled person possesses all the civil and political rights that other citizens have, and it should, as a general rule, be made possible for him or her to exercise them. However, certain forms of disability—for instance, the numerically important category of those who have mental handicaps—constitute an obstacle to the responsible exercise of these rights. Even in these cases action should be taken not in an arbitrary manner or by applying repressive measures, but on the basis of rigorous and objective ethical and juridical criteria.

12. On the other hand, the disabled person must be urged not to be content with being only the subject of rights, accustomed to receiving care and solidarity from others, with a merely passive attitude. He is not only a receiver; he must be helped to be a giver to the full extent of his capabilities. An important and decisive moment in his formation will be reached when he becomes aware of his dignity and worth and recognizes that something is expected from him and that he too can and should contribute to the progress and well-being of his family and community. The idea that he has of himself should of course be realistic, but also positive; allowing him to see himself as a person capable of responsibility, able to exercise his own will and to collaborate with others.

13. Many individuals, associations and institutions are today dedicated by profession, and often by a genuine humanitarian

and religious calling, to helping the disabled. In many cases they have demonstrated a preference for "voluntary" personnel and educators, because they see in them a particular sense of unselfishness and solidarity. This observation makes clear that, although technical and professional competence is certainly necessary and ought indeed to be cultivated and improved, by itself it is not sufficient. A rich human sensitivity must be added to competence. Those who commendably dedicate themselves to the service of the disabled should have scientific knowledge of their disabilities, but they should also comprehend with their hearts the person who bears the handicap. They should learn to become sensitive to the special signs with which the disabled express themselves and communicate. They should acquire the art of making the proper gesture and saying the right word. They should know how to accept with calmness possible reactions of forms of emotion and learn to dialogue with the parents and families of the disabled. This competence will not be fully human unless it is interiorly sustained by suitable moral and spiritual dispositions: attentiveness, sensitivity and particular respect for everything in the human person that is a source of weakness and dependence. Care and help for disabled persons then becomes a school also for parents, educators and service personnel: a school of genuine humanity, a demanding school, a noble, school, an uplifting school.

14. It is very important and even necessary that professional services receive material and moral support from the public authorities with a view to being organized in the most adequate way possible and to having the specialized interventions function effectively. Many countries have already provided, or are in the process of providing, exemplary legislation that defines and protects the legal status of the disabled person. Where such legislation does not yet exist it is the duty of the government to provide an effective guarantee and to promote the rights of the disabled. To this end, it would be advantageous for families and voluntary organizations to be associated in drawing up juridical and social norms in this matter.

15. Even the best legislation however risks having no effect on the social context and not producing full results if it is not

accepted into the personal conscience of the citizens and the collective consciousness of the community.

Handicapped persons, their families and relatives are part of the whole human family. However large their number may unfortunately be, they form a minority group within the whole community. This is enough to entail the danger that they may not be given sufficient general interest. Add to that the often spontaneous reaction of a community that rejects and psychologically represses that which does not fit into its habits. People do not want to be faced with forms of existence which visibly reflect the negative aspects of life. This gives rise to the phenomenon of exclusion and discrimination as a kind of mechanism of defence and rejection. Since however man and society are truly human when they enter into a conscious and willing process of accepting even weakness, of solidarity and of sharing in others' sufferings, the tendency referred to must be countered by education.

The celebration of the International Year of Disabled Persons therefore offers a favourable opportunity for a more precise overall reconsideration of the situation, of the problems and of the requirements of millions of those who make up the human family, particularly in the Third World. It is important that this occasion not be allowed to pass by in vain. With the contribution of science and of all levels of society, it should lead to a better understanding of the disabled person and of his dignity and rights; and above all it should foster sincere and active love for every human being in his or her uniqueness and concrete situation.

16. Christians have an irreplaceable mission to carry out in this regard.

Recalling their responsibility as witnesses to Christ, they must adopt as their own the Saviour's sentiments towards the suffering and stimulate an attitude of charity and examples of it in the world, so that there is never any lack of interest in our brothers and sisters who are less endowed. The Second Vatican Council identified in that charitable presence the essential core of the apostolate of lay people. It recalled that Christ made love

of one's neighbour his personal commandment "and enriched it with a new meaning when he identified himself with his brothers as the object of charity... For, in assuming human nature, he united all of humanity to himself as his family, and he made charity the distinguishing mark of his disciples in the words: 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13 : 35). In the early days the Church linked the 'agape' to Eucharistic supper and by so doing showed herself entirely united around Christ. So too, at all times, she is recognized by the distinguishing sign of love and, while rejoicing at initiatives taken elsewhere, she claims charitable works as her own inalienable duty and right. That is why mercy to the poor and the sick, and works of charity and mutual aid for the alleviation of all kinds of human needs, are held in special honour by the Church" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 8).

In this International Year of Disabled Persons Christians will therefore stand side by side with their brothers and sisters of all organizations in order to foster, support and increase initiatives suitable for alleviating the situation of the suffering and for inserting them harmoniously into the context of normal civil life, to the extent that this is possible. Christians will make their contribution in personnel and resources, especially through the deserving institutions that—in the name of Christ and of his love and with the marvellous example of people wholly consecrated to the Lord—devote themselves especially to giving education, professional training and post-school assistance to young disabled persons and to caring generously for the worst cases. Parishes and youth groups of various kinds will give special care to families in which one of these children marked by sorrow is born and grows to maturity; they will also study, continually apply and, if necessary, revise suitable methods of catechesis to the disabled, and they will pay attention to their insertion into cultural and religious activities, so as to ensure that they will be full members of their Christian community, in accordance with their clear right to appropriate spiritual and moral education.

17. Celebrating the Day of Peace at the beginning of this year, the Holy Father mentioned publicly in the Vatican Basilica the initiatives of the International Year of Disabled Persons and

called for special attention to solving their serious problems. He now renews his call to show concern for the lot of these brothers and sisters of ours. He repeats what he said then: "If only a minimum part of the budget for the arms race were assigned for this purpose, important successes could be achieved and the fate of many suffering persons alleviated" (Homily on 1 January 1980). His Holiness applauds the various initiatives that will be undertaken on the international level and also those that will be attempted in other fields, and he urges especially the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church to give an example of total generosity. Entrusting the dear disabled persons throughout the world to the motherly protection of the Holy Virgin, as he did on that occasion, he repeats his hopeful trust that, "under Mary's maternal gaze, experiences of human and Christian solidarity will be multiplied, in a renewed brotherhood that will unite the weak and the strong in the common path of the divine vocation of the human person" (*ibidem*).

From the Vatican, 4 March 1981