

# An Unlimited Joy

In a Synodal Church in mission, how can the co-responsibility of the faithful with disabilities be fostered?

*Summary of the contributions collected during the Synod Listening Session organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life*

## Introduction

In September 2022, the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life and the General Secretariat of the Synod invited more than thirty faithful with disabilities from the five continents and belonging to Bishops' Conferences and international associations to offer their contribution to the Synod process.

At the end of a few months of work, as participants in this group, we presented a first document with the summary of our proposals to the General Secretariat of the Synod and to the Holy Father. In view of the Second Session of the General Assembly of the Synod in October 2024, we are presenting a new document which is the result of further consultation in response to the question: **"In a Synodal Church in mission, how can the co-responsibility of the faithful with disabilities be fostered?"**.

To this end, it is necessary to begin with the statements made in the Summary Report of the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2023), according to which *"in promoting co-responsibility for the mission of all the baptized, we recognize the apostolic capabilities of people with disabilities. We want to foster the contribution to evangelization that comes from the immense wealth of humanity that the disabled harbour. We recognize their experiences of suffering, marginalization, and discrimination that they undergo, sometimes even within the Christian community itself"* (chap. 8/k).

Having said this, we believe that co-responsibility can be experienced and implemented in different areas and in different ways. First of all, it requires attentive listening and concrete commitment on the part of every ecclesial community. In the Synodal Church everyone listens to each other and it is necessary to give conscious and qualified attention to all the faithful, without exceptions, even to those who experience disabilities, but a proactive attitude is needed on the part of everyone. In other words, our active participation in the life of the Church requires the involvement of each and every one of us. It is necessary that from an early age we are given the opportunity to grow in our communities so as to

become adults that enjoy full rights and that can be agents of positive change. To this end, we too need guidance for personal growth and for acquiring full awareness of ourselves. The inclusive Church that Pope Francis announces "for all, all, all" invites every Christian (even those like us who experience a disability) to shoulder their responsibility in pursuing the vocation and mission we all receive through Baptism.

Certainly, in general, much progress has been made. The Synod has generated new expectations and new dynamics, driven by the indications set out in our first document, but it is also true that not only are there still prejudice and obstacles, but also paternalism and a strong welfare mindset still exists, which limit our active participation in the life of the Church. For example, in church communities - dioceses and parishes - we have rarely been able to participate in the first phase of the Synod. Indeed, we need a cultural and structural change in the mindset of the entire Church.

We are grateful to the Holy See and, in particular, to the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, for the work undertaken and for the relationships that have been built during this process, which have concretely allowed us to experience "the Church as our home". In the synodal journey everyone was able to offer their contribution and we hope that this second document (like the first, entitled "The Church is our home") will be adequately disseminated throughout the local Church (dioceses, parishes, communities).

Having said this, a first step is to get to know and recognize the reality of the world of persons with disabilities, with its complex problems and the results achieved at a social, cultural, political-legislative and educational level.

It is also necessary for the Church to be aware of the joys and hopes, the needs and obstacles experienced by all its members. For this reason, a further step to be taken is to gain a better understanding of the different types of disability so as to ensure respect for each person and enable everyone to fully develop their vocation in the Church. In addition to distinguishing between physical, sensory, intellectual and cognitive limitations, it is necessary to become aware of the cultural and physical barriers that prevent our active participation in the life of the Church.

Conditions must be created so that persons with disabilities can be the protagonists of their own lives, of their own spiritual experience and of their own apostolic commitment. If we pool together all disability conditions in a generic project "for all" (structures, pastoral orientations and activities) we would only be increasing difficulties and keeping the door open to paternalism, thus fuelling the "culture of waste".

To be concrete, we propose various levels of action which can help enhance the co-responsibility of the faithful with disabilities:

1. The level of accessibility
2. The level of training
3. The level of theological reflection
4. The level of active participation in the pastoral life of the Church

## **1. The level of accessibility**

It is necessary to ensure greater access to the spaces, celebrations and documents of the Church. This means that we need to remove the architectural barriers which in many cases make churches inaccessible to the disabled, we need to translate documents into the national sign languages and provide audio descriptions of celebrations, as well as Braille versions of ecclesial documents. Using a simplified language, in addition to being a further element of accessibility, would allow a wider diffusion of many documents. In particular, it would be significant if these measures were to be adopted starting with the celebrations of the Holy Father and the documents of the Holy See.

To ensure full access to persons with disabilities, it would be desirable for each particular Church to make available all the necessary economic resources.

## **2. The level of training**

In order to promote authentic inclusion at all levels in the Church, training is of crucial importance. *Pastors and pastoral workers* must be trained to understand what disability is, how it affects people on a social and ecclesial level and what challenges believers with disabilities face. Training must put them in a position to be aware of and attentive to the needs of individual people.

To fight against cultural stereotypes, it would be necessary and important to offer the experiences listed below to as many people as possible in communities and at all levels within the Church (diocesan – local/parish or pastoral units):

- a. information accompanied by training experiences on the different forms of disability: cognitive, intellectual, sensory, motor, neurological disabilities including their different degrees (mild - medium - severe);
- b. information accompanied by experiences on the needs related to the daily life of persons with disabilities: at school, at work, in social settings, in the area of "independent

living", knowledge of the laws and rights that concern them, their access to information (digital and non-digital information);

c. training on the communication methods and tools used by persons with disabilities;

d. listening to direct testimonies of people with different disabilities, inviting them to participate in collaborative working groups with social entities that take care of their needs, in order to understand the difficulties they face on a daily basis and work out solutions together.

At the same time, it is necessary to:

e. train catechists 'specialised' in managing and accompanying the mystagogical path of the Christian faith with specific attention to persons with disabilities. It would be important that, even the curricula of seminarians should include the topic of disability in an adequate manner, including direct testimonies from persons with disabilities.

f. Train operators to offer persons with disabilities personalized courses in preparation for the sacraments, including holy orders and marriage. To this end, we must also train persons with disabilities so that they can give their contribution as witnesses and trainers. In particular, married couples with disabilities could collaborate in providing family pastoral care in the dioceses.

g. Train the *community* to change the way they see persons with disabilities so that they may appreciate our potential and our skills and not focus on our limits. We need to reiterate the difference between disability and illness because not all sick people are persons with disabilities and not all persons with disabilities are sick. It is necessary to organize workshops/moments of reflection involving the community, where disability can be presented and discussed, enabling people to become familiar with disability so as to gradually change their attitude and therefore not consider the issue to be of exclusive interest of specialists and the families that have a member with a disability.

h. Provide training to *families* where a member has a disability so as to support them. In particular, it has been found that it is important to involve them so that they can discover another way of seeing their children.

i. And last but not least, it is important to train persons with disabilities so that they can become aware of their right\duty to participate fully in the life of the Church and to be trained to be evangelizers. The disabled can be missionaries, they can announce and spread the Word of God, as well as serve in church during celebrations.

### **3. The level of theological reflection**

In recent years, new perspectives of theological reflection have been explored, driven also by the contribution of theologians who have experience with disability. Likewise, we believe that – in order to avoid a distorted image of disability associated only with “pain” - it is useful to further deepen the reflection on the meaning of Incarnation, the Passion, the Cross and the healing and salvific action of Christ. The same applies to the baptismal dignity of the faithful with disabilities which, although theologically obvious, does not appear reflected in the personal and pastoral experience within the various areas of the Church.

In pursuing these new horizons of theological reflection, it is important to recognize that disability has no relationship with sin (original or otherwise) and that the limit is an intrinsic characteristic of the nature of man, who is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1, 26-27). All these limits were taken on and redeemed by a merciful God who through Incarnation took upon Himself our humanity in its entirety.

### **4. The level of active participation in the pastoral life of the Church**

#### *a. The sacraments*

As stated by the Directory for Catechesis, "no one can refuse the Sacraments to persons with disabilities". This applies to the sacraments of Christian Initiation, Marriage and Holy Orders. To this end, we suggest that, if necessary, appropriate reflection be initiated in the field of canon law.

#### *b. Ministerialism*

It is necessary to find new forms of participation and consolidate existing ones. Persons with disabilities - according to the skills, gifts, charisms and aptitudes of each person - should be invited to and be placed in a position to serve the Church by accessing the established ministries of the acolyte, the catechist, the extraordinary minister of communion, the diaconate and are to be put in a position to respond to their vocation, be it religious or lay.

In particular, it is effective that catechesis for persons with disabilities - in the case of deaf and blind people – be provided by people who themselves experience these conditions.

*c. Participation*

We propose a long-term work strategy at all levels of the Church: universal, continental, Bishops' Conferences, dioceses and parishes.

We propose that within the Roman Curia a body (commission, committee...) be set up consisting of persons with disabilities as well as experts, which could also perform the function of an Observatory on issues concerning the life of persons with disabilities in the Church.

The Bishops' Conferences should envisage dedicated offices to promote the training and spiritual and pastoral care of both persons with disabilities and the ecclesial community itself; just as there should be a team or a person in charge in every diocese for those who experience a disability.

Spaces should be created where faithful with disabilities are represented in community decision-making bodies at diocesan and parish level – for instance in the pastoral councils - to ensure that their voices are heard and considered, so that nothing that concerns them is decided without consulting them.

*d. Concrete modalities of pastoral action*

It is necessary to encourage a wider active participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the parish community/pastoral units. This can be facilitated by implementing some concrete actions:

- get to know persons with disabilities present in one's territory, both those who live isolated and those who are organized in social, cultural and sporting associations and groups, through listening centres or social observatories, aimed at bringing to light existing situations;
- maintain contacts with associations and groups of persons with disabilities, so that they may share their problems, aspirations and skills in all areas of personal and social life;
- pay attention to the families of persons with disabilities, who need to be listened to and supported, also through the creation of help desks;
- enhance the charisms of persons with disabilities, encouraging them and enabling them to participate in the local ecclesial activities;
- overcome, where still present, the welfare mentality, replacing "acting on behalf" with "acting with". In much the same manner, support and share efforts for a more inclusive, supportive and fraternal society;

- identify digital contexts (platforms, web pages) and concrete methods in pastoral commissions to share best practices and positive and effective experiences of participation and co-responsibility of lay faithful with disabilities in the Church, at all levels.

In conclusion, we wish to reiterate that having a disability is not an obstacle to following Christ and that the Synod is proving to be a precious tool for understanding this truth within the Church. The Lord calls each of us, as baptized believers, to experience *an unlimited joy*.

**Below are the signatures of the participants**