



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE CONGRESS ON INTEGRATION
OF DISABLED CHILDREN**

Saturday, 4 December 1999

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I am pleased to receive you all, participants in the congress on *"The family and the integration of disabled children and adolescents"*, organized by the Pontifical Council for the Family in collaboration with the *Special Family Education Centre (CEFAES)* of Madrid and the *Leopold Programme* of Venezuela. I greet Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, and thank him for his kind words, conveying the sentiments of everyone here. I greet and thank each one of you for coming, and for your commitment to addressing so important a theme which concerns many families. I hope that the results of this meeting will help to improve the condition of so many children and adolescents in difficulty.

In the context of Advent, which prepares us to celebrate the Lord's Birth, your symposium acquires special importance. In fact, reflection on the condition of children becomes easier in the light of the Child Jesus. It is when children are stricken by difficulties, problems or illness, that the values of faith can come to the aid of human values, so that the original personal dignity of the disabled is also acknowledged and respected. Your congress is therefore well timed, as it turns its attention to families, to help them discover a sign of God's love also in their disabled children.

2. The arrival of a suffering child is certainly a disconcerting event for the family, who are left deeply shocked by it. From this point of view too, it is important to encourage parents to devote "special attention ... to the children, by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity,

and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true for every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped" (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 26).

The family is the place *par excellence* where the gift of life is received as such, and the dignity of the child is acknowledged with special expressions of care and tenderness. Above all, when children are more vulnerable and exposed to the risk of being rejected by others, it is the family that can most effectively safeguard their dignity, equal to that of healthy children. It is clear that in these situations families faced with complex problems have the right to support. Hence the importance of people who can be close to them, whether they are friends, doctors or social workers. Parents must be encouraged to face this far from easy situation, without turning in on themselves. It is important that the problem be shared not only with close relatives, but also with qualified persons and friends.

These are the "Good Samaritans" of our time who, by their generous and friendly presence, repeat the gesture of Christ, who always made his comforting closeness felt by the sick and by those in difficulty. The Church is grateful to these people who do their best everyday and everywhere to alleviate suffering with "daily gestures of openness, sacrifice and unselfish care" (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 27).

3. If the disadvantaged child lives in a welcoming and open environment, he does not feel alone but in the heart of the community, and can thus learn that life is always worth living. Parents, for their part, experience the human and Christian value of solidarity. I have been able to recall on other occasions that it is important to show by deeds that illness does not create insurmountable barriers, nor does it prevent relations of genuine Christian charity with those who are its victims. Illness, indeed, must prompt an attitude of special attention to these persons who belong in every way to the category of the poor who will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

I am thinking, at this moment, of examples of extraordinary devotion shown by numerous parents toward their children; I am thinking of the many initiatives of families who are ready to welcome disabled children with generous enthusiasm in foster care or adoption. When families are properly nourished by the Word of God, miracles of genuine Christian solidarity take place within them. This is the most convincing response to those who consider disabled children a burden or even as unworthy to live the gift of their life to the full. To welcome the weakest, helping them on their journey, is a sign of civilization.

4. It is the task of Bishops and priests to help parents, so that they understand and accept that life is always a gift of God, even when it is marked by suffering and illness. Every person is the object of basic rights which are inalienable, inviolable and indivisible. Every person: *therefore also the disabled handicapped*, who precisely because of their disabilities may encounter greater difficulty in the actual exercise of these rights. Thus they should not be left alone, but to be welcomed by

society and, according to their abilities, integrated into it as full members.

With regard to every human being, who is always worthy of the greatest respect because of his dignity as a person, civil society and the Church have specific roles to play by helping to foster a culture of solidarity in the community. A disabled person, just like every other weak person, must be encouraged to take charge of his own life. It is therefore the task of the family, having overcome the initial shock, to understand first of all that the value of *life* transcends that of *efficiency*. If it does not understand this, it risks being disappointed and discouraged when, despite every attempt, the hoped-for cure or recovery is not obtained.

5. Families clearly need adequate support from the community. Sometimes first-aid systems are needed for critical moments, and at others well-organized homes on the lines of small communities with appropriate facilities are necessary, when it is no longer possible for disabled children to live at home.

In any case, it is important to maintain constant, regular contact with the family, as it is well known that talking, listening and dialogue are essential factors in regulating and coordinating behaviour. It is also necessary for the disadvantaged child to be able to recognize the moments of attention and love shown to him. In this role families are indispensable; but it will be difficult for them to achieve appreciable results on their own. This is where the intervention of specialized associations and other forms of assistance outside the family come in, which assure the presence of persons with whom the disturbed child can talk and establish a friendly and educational relationship.

Group life and friendship are therefore an excellent conditions for promoting deconditioning and better personal and social adjustment through the establishment of open and gratifying relations.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, I have paused to reflect with you on some practical aspects of great importance regarding the integration of disabled children in families and in society. Much has been written on this issue and pastoral action must pay great attention to these problems. Children deserve every care and this is especially true when they are in conditions of difficulty.

However, over and above all beneficial scientific research and every social and educational initiative, what is important for the believer is humble and confident trust in God. It is above all in prayer that the family will find the strength to face difficulties. By constantly turning to the Lord, families will learn how to welcome, love and appreciate the child who is marked by suffering.

May Mary, Mother of hope, help and sustain those who find themselves in these situations. To her I entrust your praiseworthy commitment, as I willingly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to all your loved ones.

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