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Pope Francis sits in a chair and touches a child's cheek as the child's father stands beside the

Pope Francis greets a family at the end of an audience with people with disabilities Dec. 3, 2022, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Making churches accessible and services understandable is important, but having wheelchair ramps and sign-language interpreters is not enough for a parish to call itself "inclusive," Pope Francis said.

The church also must meet people's needs for "belonging, relating to others and cultivating their spiritual lives so they experience the fullness and blessing of the Lord" for the "unique and marvelous gift" that they are, the pope told a group of people with disabilities and those who minister with them.

The pope's meeting with the group Dec. 3 marked the International Day for Persons with Disabilities; the pope also issued a written message for the occasion.

In the meeting, Francis called for the "conversion" of the Catholic community to move from using inclusion as a "slogan" to ensuring people with disabilities are welcomed, integrated, recognized and supported as full members of the community.

"There is no inclusion if the experience of fraternity and mutual communion is missing," the pope said. "There is no inclusion if there is no conversion in the practices of coexistence and relationships."

Inclusion, he said, means "each person, with his or her limitations and gifts, feels encouraged to do his or her part for the good of the entire ecclesial body and for the good of society as a whole."

In his written message for the international day, Francis focused on how Catholics with disabilities can teach others one of the central messages of the Gospel: human beings need God's love, mercy and strength.

The awareness of one's limits, he wrote, "allows us to appreciate all the more God's loving decision to help us in our weakness. An awareness that frees us from sorrow and lament -- even for good reason -- and opens our hearts to praise."

"The joy that radiates from those who encounter Jesus and entrust their lives to him is no illusion or the fruit of naiveté," the pope said. "It is the power of his resurrection penetrating lives marked by fragility."

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"Truly, we can speak of a 'magisterium of fragility' that, if heeded, would make our society more humane and fraternal, enabling all of us to understand that happiness is bread that is not eaten alone," he said.

If everyone became more aware of their frailty and need for others, he said, it would "help us to have less hostile relationships with those around us" and begin to work together to find solutions to "the senseless conflicts we are experiencing."

Francis also used his message to urge people to remember "all those women and men with disabilities who live in the midst of war or have been themselves disabled as a result of warfare."

"How many people -- in Ukraine and in other theaters of war -- remain imprisoned by ongoing conflicts, without the possibility of escape?" he asked. "They need to be given special attention and their access to humanitarian aid facilitated in every possible way."

The pope also thanked Catholics with disabilities who participated in the listening process for the Synod of Bishops, sharing their experiences and pointing out the ways they have been included or excluded in their parish communities.

The synod process, he said, is a reminder that in the church "there can be no us and them, but a single us, with Jesus Christ at the center, where each person brings his or her own gifts and limitations."

"This awareness, founded on the fact that we are all part of the same vulnerable humanity assumed and sanctified by Christ, eliminates arbitrary distinctions and opens the door to the participation of each baptized member in the life of the church," he said.

"I trust that every Christian community will be open to the presence of our brothers and sisters with disabilities and ensure that they are always welcomed and fully included," Francis wrote.